

**“On the Spectrum”: Rereading Contact and Affect in *Jane Eyre***

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<1>In her notorious piece appearing in *The Quarterly Review* of December 1848, Elizabeth Rigby comments on the “sheer rudeness and vulgarity” of the recently published *Jane Eyre* (440) and cuts acutely at the narrator, observing:

We hear nothing but self-eulogiums on the perfect tact and wondrous penetration with which she is gifted, and yet almost every word she utters offends us, not only with the absence of these qualities, but with the positive contrasts of them, in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity. She is one of those ladies who put us in the unpleasant predicament of undervaluing their very virtues for dislike of the person in whom they are represented. One feels provoked as *Jane Eyre* stands before us—for in the wonderful reality of her thoughts and descriptions, she seems accountable for all done in her name—with principles you must approve in the main, and yet with language and manners that offend you in every particular. Even in that *chef d’oeuvre* of brilliant retrospective sketching, the description of her early life, it is the childhood and not the child that interests you. The little Jane, with her sharp eyes and dogmatic speeches, is a being you neither could fondle nor love. [...] As the child, so also the woman—an uninteresting, sententious, pedantic thing [...] (441)

It is a punishing review, but it brings home an essential point for all readers, even those who feel profoundly attached to the text: there is some quirk in the narrative character that irks, that stands clear of our affection, that resists our sense of intimacy. No matter what we may see *Jane Eyre* as being “about,” no matter how we may approach the text, there is no getting away from the fact that the affect and social conduct of the narrator are highly unusual. From its first publication in 1848 and persistently throughout the century and a half that has followed, critics and theorists have commented on the idiosyncratic nature of Jane’s feelings and reactions, on her unconventional approach to relationships, and on the singularly remote, withdrawn, or unattractive quality of her social intercourse. There may be many fruitful approaches to understanding Jane’s affect and demeanor, including widely disseminated postcolonialist and feminist readings that interpret the protagonist’s behaviors in terms of government and politics. This essay suggests, however, that a new approach to *Jane Eyre*’s sociality enables a reading of the heroine as an individual on the autistic spectrum, and that such an interpretation, in turn, invites crucial new questions about the narrative of *Jane Eyre* and its apparent politics.

<2>A sampling of the copious critical and theoretical literature surrounding *Jane Eyre* demonstrates a common theme running through even the most disparate approaches to the text. In addition to that which appeared in the *Quarterly*, another early negative review of the novel, from *The Christian Remembrancer*, says of the narrator, “Never was there a better hater” (Review of *Jane Eyre* 439). In his laudatory 1847 review, George Henry Lewes cites the book’s “strange power of subjective representation” (437). Other critics have followed suit in recognizing the idiosyncratic nature of the narrator, of the text, and frequently of the author as well. In 1916, Virginia Woolf’s interpretation of *Jane Eyre* cues the reader first to think of Charlotte Brontë, “unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation.” Woolf compares Brontë’s writing unfavorably with that of Austen and Tolstoy, characterizing it as “narrow,” “constricted,” and comparatively unidimensional. The impressions of writers like Brontë, she adds, are “self-centered and self-limited,” “close packed and strongly stamped between [...] narrow walls. Nothing issues from their mind which has not been marked with their own impress. They can learn little from other writers, and what they adopt they cannot assimilate.” Cora Kaplan sums up Woolf’s assessment of “Brontë’s heroine [as] located at the margins of bourgeois culture and normalcy, her social and psychic condition made to seem both voluntary and deeply eccentric” (18). In his 1950s reading of *Jane Eyre* as gothic, Robert Heilman abstracts the narrator’s character: “as a girl she is lonely, ‘passionate,’ ‘strange,’ ‘like nobody there’” (460). He comments that she is “so portrayed as to evoke new feelings” and observes that Jane joins Rochester at Ferndean in a “closed-in life.”(1) Terry Eagleton’s *Myths of Power* (1975) interprets Jane’s “self [as] a free, blank, ‘pre-social’ atom” (491). In the early 1970s, Adrienne Rich writes about Jane’s extreme disconnectedness, her lonely and orphaned state, as a fundamental metaphor for the condition of women in patriarchal society. Other feminist approaches, like Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), ask the reader to understand *Jane Eyre* in terms of a “secret self.” In the mid-1980s, Gayatri Spivak’s groundbreaking postcolonialist reading of *Jane Eyre* is deeply critical of the “isolationism” of the narrator and of the like response Spivak sees the text as inspiring in its readers. Following Spivak, Nancy Armstrong positions *Jane Eyre* within a tradition of domestic fiction that “detached the desiring self from place, time, and material cause,” thus creating in their “universal forms of subjectivity” a dangerously anti-social narrative mechanism (187). And Sally Shuttleworth also proposes that *Jane Eyre* “can be read as a quintessential expression of Victorian individualism” (182, qtd. in Kaplan 30). But perhaps most striking, for the present purposes, are the observations of R.A. York, who speaks directly to the narrator’s characteristic “silence.” In his *Strangers and Secrets: Communication in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1994), York demonstrates that Jane is “fundamentally uncommunicative for much of the novel,” that “she retains a distaste for contact [...] throughout much of her life,” and that “her replies can be brief and uncooperative in the extreme” (62). Whatever other purpose or meaning such silence, secrecy, isolationism, rudeness, or resistance to contact may have, whether interpreted from the standpoint of Christian values, within a Freudian framework, from the context of Marxist or feminist politics, or of postcolonialist theory, the fundamental idiosyncrasy of Jane’s affect, what one critic identifies as her “social freakery” (Chen 374), remains a quality which confronts the reader at every turn.

<3>From the very outset of Jane’s life with her uncle’s family, the Reeds, she is regarded as difficult and temperamental. Aunt Reed complains of Jane’s affect even from babyhood, saying of the infant Jane, “‘I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it—a sickly, whining, pining thing!’” (232; ch. 21).(2) Her reaction to the baby is uncharitable, certainly, but it is nonetheless

worthy of examination, for it is not merely jealousy for her own children or class prejudice which dampens Aunt Reed's affection for her infant niece; it is clearly something in the baby's very being that irks her, some real but insubstantial irritation that lies behind her statement, "I would as soon have been charged with a pauper brat out of a workhouse" (232; ch 21). Jane's unhappy childhood is so familiar that it has become almost a cliché; her aunt despises her and her cousins exclude her. Ultimately, Mrs. Reed's assessment, provided in the opening page of the narrative, is almost diagnostic in its cruel precision: Jane is explicitly lacking "a sociable and child-like disposition" (7; ch. 1). There is certainly no love lost between them. Writes Jane:

I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage. If they did not love me, in fact, as little did I love them. They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless thing, incapable of serving their interest, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious thing, cherishing the germs of indignation at their treatment, of contempt of their judgment. (15-16; ch. 2)

Jane is lonely and ill-treated both by her own account and that of others, the servants whispering to one another of her wrongs, but agreeing at the same time that something in the child's demeanor resists affection or attachment. The housemaid, Abbot, comments that "if she were a nice pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that" (26; ch. 3); so, too, Abbot remarks to her fellow servant that Jane is "an underhand little thing: I never saw a girl of her age with so much cover" (12; ch. 2). In an uncharacteristic moment of frankness, the young Jane once approaches the more favored of these two maids, her nurse Bessie, with an impulsive embrace and an open plea against being scolded. But Bessie's reaction to this momentary impulse serves further to affirm the sense of Jane as withdrawn and forbidding: "'You are a strange child, Miss Jane,' she said, as she looked down at me: 'a little roving, solitary thing [...]. You're such a queer, frightened, shy little thing. You should be bolder. [...] Don't be afraid of me. Don't start when I chance to speak rather sharply: It's so provoking'" (39; ch. 4).

<4>But it is not boldness, exactly, that Jane lacks. An unpopular orphaned child who will physically and verbally attack those who persecute her, despite their advantage in age, size, and power, cannot comfortably be understood as merely shy or shrinking and the assaults that Jane makes on her older cousin John, and more especially on his mother, are breathtaking, moments of triumph for the beleaguered narrator and for those readers who identify with her browbeaten childhood. Jane's famous speech to Mrs. Reed, rejecting her aunt and calling her to account for the terrible injustices the narrator had suffered, cannot easily be figured into the withdrawn character with which the reader is otherwise confronted. Aunt Reed remains baffled by Jane's behavior almost a decade later and is troubled by the child's outburst as an "uncanny" experience. Mrs. Reed revisits this encounter repeatedly, on her deathbed, still trying to configure Jane's behavior into a meaningful context. She refers to Jane's "disposition" as "very bad," "impossible to understand," and "incomprehensible" (239-40; ch. 21). Confronting the narrator in adulthood, Mrs. Reed laments, "'I could not forget your conduct to me, Jane—the fury with which you once turned on me; the tone in which you declared you abhorred me the worst of

anybody in the world; the unchildlike look and voice with which you affirmed that the very thought of me made you sick, and asserted that I had treated you with miserable cruelty.” For Mrs. Reed, it is as though ““an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice.”” For the socially conventional Aunt Reed, Jane is an enigma,(3) “something mad,” a “fiend,” a being scarcely human, her affect and the extraordinary quality of her sociality locating her outside the explicable boundaries of human social contact:

“I have had more trouble with that child than any one would believe. Such a burden to be left on my hands—and so much annoyance as she caused me, daily and hourly, with her incomprehensible disposition, and her sudden starts of temper, and her continual, unnatural watchings of one’s movements! I declare she talked to me once like something mad, or like a fiend—no child ever spoke or looked as she did; I was glad to get her away from the house.” (231; ch. 21)

But if the narrator’s character is enigmatic for her aunt, Jane is equally at a loss to understand her own inability to please. She is conscious that others do not like her, but she also suffers miserably from the coldness and exclusion she experiences. Though resentful of her treatment as a child, Jane is nevertheless bewildered, filled with painful wondering at the implicit rejection she experiences:

Why was I always suffering, always brow-beaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one’s favour? Eliza, who was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. [...] John, no one thwarted, much less punished [...] despite his violent and destructive behaviors]. I dared commit no fault; I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night. (15; ch. 2)

Even in adulthood, nothing beholden to her aunt, Jane continues to seek the affection she feels she deserves, apologizing to the woman who had made her life a misery and arguing, ““I should have been glad to love you if you would have let me””(240; ch. 21). Aligning with the textual observations of various critics, Jane’s experiences in childhood, confirmed from a variety of perspectives within the novel, clearly define a person with an unusual sociality and personal affect. The person thus described, while baffling to others and often personally bewildered by social conventions and the unspoken expectations of interpersonal contact, may be identified within literature of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries as “autistic.”

<5>Coined in the early 1940s, the term “autism” was developed independently by two doctors—Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner—working autonomously continents apart (the former in Austria and the latter in the United States). Early work with autistic children by famed child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim and popular representations of profoundly autistic people have resulted in a widespread but false understanding of autism often in extreme negative terms, as completely disabling and as a “tragedy” for those affected. The commonest sense of the autistic individual is of a person who is inevitably non-verbal, of low intelligence, and frequently violent, features

which have been widely disseminated through a plethora of popular sources. Advertising for personal injury lawyers claims massive settlements in autism cases, indirectly informing the public unconscious and adding to the sense that autism is a calamity. Popular sources of electronic information—government websites, online encyclopedias, and commercial databases—describe children as “suffering from autism,” as silent and unresponsive, and popular print sources report of an autism “epidemic.”(4) In addition, grass-roots health-care activists who see the recent “explosion” in diagnosed autism as resulting from environmental factors, especially the irresponsible over-use of childhood immunizations, urge political and social action, but also typically portray autism in the bleakest light.(5)

<6>Medical or therapeutic professionals working with autistic clients are also sometimes responsible for making devastating global claims about autism, as lamentable for their bias as for their inaccuracy. One recent text designed to guide therapeutic work with autistic adults claims, “In autism the prerequisites for creativity are not present. The adult with autism cannot extend the known, or bring together understandings to create new ones, because the known remains confined to the specific context in which it was learnt. [...] Autistic thinking is of a non-imaginative kind” (Jordan and Powell 78-79). This understanding of autism in negative terms, as deficit, is most infamously propagated in Bettelheim’s classic book-length study on autism, *The Empty Fortress* (1967), a failed Freudian approach that sees autism as a prison and that ruthlessly blames parents (and mothers especially) for what the writer understands as a form of childhood psychosis. Even sympathetic accounts of autism written by family members frequently reinforce the idea that the person “inside” the autism is living an experience of imprisonment. Writing in 1999, Wendy Robinson, for instance, explains of her relationship with her autistic son, “We never broke down the wall and retrieved the person that could live independently and be socially aware” (244). Altogether, popular notions of autism give the impression that the withdrawn, insular, autistic self is profoundly damaged, incapable of feeling, dangerous, and diminished in capacity for thought or creativity.

<7>This sense of autism not only diverges radically from the lived experience of many autistic people,(6) but it is also clearly contrary to the writings of Kanner and Asperger which first defined and delineated the autistic personality. Key to this misunderstanding is a failure to look closely at the very word first coined to describe the single defining feature of different autistic persons. Though later writers frequently comment on the amazing coincidence of Asperger and Kanner coming up with the word “autism” independently, there is actually nothing strange about this, since “autism” literally means “selfness” and is the primary characteristic of the personality described. Thus, the principal feature of autism is an unusual degree of inwardness, aloneness, or independence, sometimes—but not always—to the exclusion of others from direct verbal exchange or eye contact. The “cases” first described by Kanner in his seminal article, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” (1943), are far from fitting the popular stereotype of autism today. Kanner’s subjects span a broad range of intelligence, skill, and social awareness. In the brief theoretical section that follows his clinical analyses, Kanner suggests that the

fundamental disorder is the children’s *inability to relate themselves* in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life. Their parents refer to them as having always been “self-sufficient”; “like in a shell”; “happiest when left alone”; “acting as if people

weren't there"; "perfectly oblivious to everything about him"; "giving the impression of silent wisdom"; "failing to develop the usual amount of social awareness"; "acting almost as if hypnotized." This is not, as in schizophrenic children or adults, a departure from an initially present relationship; it is not a "withdrawal" from formerly existing participation. There is from the start an *extreme autistic aloneness* that, whenever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from the outside. Direct physical contact or such motion or noise as threatens to disrupt the aloneness is either treated "as if it weren't there" or, if this is no longer sufficient, resented painfully as distressing interference. (41; emphasis in original)

Indeed, the brilliance of Kanner's work lies in his ability to recognize the single defining feature across a diverse range of other characteristics, lighting on the "autistic" quality of the children studied, despite a wide range of verbal capabilities and apparent intelligence. As autism expert Leon Eisenberg comments, "The genius of [Kanner's] discovery was to detect the cardinal traits [...] in the midst of phenomenology as diverse as muteness in one child and verbal precocity in another" (qtd. in Rutter 51). Kanner was highly conscious of the intelligence of many of the children he observed, and he noted particularly that all the subjects with whom he initially interacted came from unusually intelligent, highly educated, and/or exceptionally productive families, noting a relationship between the personality of the child and the exceptional nature of the family, and thus pointing not only to a potential genetic component to autism, but also to a possible understanding of autism as linked to other idiosyncratic aspects of cognition or intelligence. In other words, despite his (sometimes cruelly) clinical approach to the autistic personality, Kanner's ground-breaking article allows room for interpreting autism in positive terms.

<8>The increasing incidence of autism in recent decades, or at least the increasing rate of diagnosis, has worked to refresh and complicate the understanding and definition of autism for many people. Specifically, the introduction of Asperger Syndrome to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) has created broader diagnostic guidelines for what constitutes autism. (Though many feel that these broader diagnostic criteria are warranted, there is some disagreement as to the accuracy of identifying "autism" and "Asperger syndrome" as discrete categories.)<sup>(7)</sup> With the broadening of the diagnostic criteria, autism/Asperger syndrome is increasingly being understood as existing on a "spectrum" and defined primarily by patterns and behaviors having to do with conventional sociality. So, for instance, in determining the presence of autism/Asperger syndrome, the DSM asks that, among other items, diagnoses consider the following:<sup>(8)</sup>

1. failure to develop appropriate peer relationships
2. lack of social or emotional reciprocity (ex., not actively participating in simple social play or games, preferring solitary activities, or involving others in activities only as tools or "mechanical" aids )
3. marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
4. use of idiosyncratic language
5. lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level

6. abnormal functioning in social interaction
7. lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people

While this is not an exhaustive compendium of the diagnostic criteria offered in the DSM, this list offers some sense of how subtle and ambiguous autistic behavior may be. Even if the individual assessed does not meet the standard for diagnosis, autism experts (including autistic people) speak of individuals as having autistic traits or characteristics. Autism is thus understood — within the medical establishment and by a popular community experienced with autism — as existing along a spectrum, with some individuals having barely discernable social idiosyncrasies, some having active social and intellectual lives that play out exclusively through non-immediate contact (e.g., through writing or within electronic communities), and with others who demonstrate no apparent contact with or interest in the “outer” world. Autism, Asperger syndrome, and related sensory and affective “conditions” are thus often encapsulated by the global diagnostic term “ASD,” or, autism spectrum disorder. Along this spectrum, the manifestation of affective idiosyncrasy is as diverse as any other human quality. In other words, autistic people are not *always* visual, or *always* nonverbal, or *always* savants; the range of personalities and interests is as various as in any other demographic pool. And the degree of what is seen as “function” (i.e., the ability to interact seamlessly with ordinary people) in some autistic persons has led many to conjecture that there is a diagnostic crisis within the medical establishment. By embracing such a broad array of social and affective behaviors, some argue, it seems that diagnosis may become either impossible or... inevitable.

<9>For many, the debate over diagnosis—especially insofar as it concerns the criteria of the DSM—is paramount, since the diagnostic pronouncement is immediately concerned with the distribution of material resources. However, for a larger portion of the population and for the purposes of fiction, formal diagnosis is beside the point. If an individual, no matter how eccentric, thrives without medical or therapeutic intervention, there is much to be said for resisting medicine, the disciplinary framework that exists, in many respects, for the tyrannical purposes of normalizing what is seen as irregular.<sup>(9)</sup> (A growing “neurodiversity” movement resists the pervasive misreading of autism as “defect” and insists on the cultural and social value of people on the spectrum, without the dubious benefit of intervention.)<sup>(10)</sup> Likewise, for a fictional character, formal diagnosis can bring no benefit. At the same time, while diagnosis may not always be advantageous, coming to an understanding of autistic personality and a recognition of autistic characteristics, both within ourselves and in the world around us, can contribute to a more complex sense of identity and an enriched political consciousness. Thus, the suggestion of this essay—that Jane Eyre is an individual on the autism spectrum—is intended not as an end, not as an incarceration of the character within the rigid framework of diagnosis, not as a gesture that cuts off meaning and interpretive possibility, but instead as a device to reopen discussion of the novel’s politics and to challenge what seem to be some of our larger presuppositions regarding the political and social meaning of the individual.

<10>To some extent, the analysis of Jane’s childhood offered earlier in this piece begins to effect this reopening, but a brief rereading of the narrator’s adult experiences within the context of recently published autism auto/biography creates a more textured sense of Jane’s autism. Literature by and about autistic persons has proliferated in recent years, from the exploratory essays of neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks<sup>(11)</sup> in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s to Temple Grandin’s

ground-breaking autobiography *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1986), to Donna Williams' best-selling *Nobody Nowhere* (1992), to the more recent productions of writers like Mark Haddon, Dawn Prince-Hughes, Daniel Tammet, and Keiko Tobe. As this genre grows and offers increasing clarity regarding the diversity of autistic personality and experience, readers can also begin to recognize certain shared themes and ideas within the literature. These frequently include: A feeling of misunderstanding and being misunderstood by others in everyday interactions; a powerful and elaborate sense of connection in some special arena or skill area (e.g., numbers, color, animals, drawing/painting, languages); the experience of being excluded, especially in childhood when rigid social structures prevail; and a sense of peace and satisfaction that comes with order and ordering, both in material and in logical terms.<sup>(12)</sup> As one rereads *Jane Eyre* in the context of this emerging literature, maintaining a consciousness of these commonalities and of the ways that autism is perceived and represented "from the inside," Charlotte Brontë's novel and *Jane Eyre*'s story gain a familiar hue, and add increasingly to the sense that the "disconnected" governess may be understood as a person "on the spectrum" (161; ch. 16).

<11>Having already touched on her experience of exclusion in childhood, an account that dovetails suggestively with narratives offered in modern autism autobiography, it may be helpful to reconsider the general character of the adult *Jane Eyre* with a sense of autism in mind. With an interpretive gesture alert to autistic possibilities, all kinds of minor details and episodes, all manner of quirky characteristics take on new significance. Jane's "Quakerish" appearance, her sense of aloneness at Lowood, even after many years of residence; the feeling of peace and wholeness she seems to derive from nature, from gardens, from plants instead of people; her silent impatience with a talkative roommate ("a teacher who occupied the same room with me kept me from the subject to which I longed to recur, by a prolonged effusion of small talk. How I wished sleep would silence her" [85; ch. 10]). The episode of homelessness between her residences at Thornfield and Moor House, failing to take valuables with her, forgetting the morsel of luggage she does take along, forgetting her newly discovered connections, are all strongly reminiscent of homeless experiences described by Prince-Hughes and Donna Williams, each of whom describes a sense of panic which induces them to leave places of comparative security. Think of Jane's sincere, but formal affection for Adele, the consideration of the girl's well-being as though from a distance. Jane's early period of engagement with Rochester, she provoking him into sparring with her continually, actively and consciously resistant to tenderer forms of affection, hints at a fear of conventional contact, a reluctance to connect sexually which is also a recurrent theme explored in autism literature.<sup>(13)</sup> Even Jane's discreet relationship with Pilot, her acknowledgment of Rochester's dog as a seeming peer, as an individual worthy of respect, demonstrates an autistic sensibility, a connection to animals that echoes that of many other autistic persons.

<12>It makes sense to explore further the appearance of *Jane Eyre*'s autism by looking more closely at the impression of missed connection that frequently arises between autistic and nonautistic people. Nonautistic people often attribute this sense of disconnect to a mistaken belief that individuals with autism have little or no feeling, but indeed, the contrary is more likely true. Autistic persons typically experience intense sensations and emotions, but may habitually reduce the *appearance* of feeling or shield the self from a barrage of overwhelming external stimuli (including dialogue and other forms of communication) in order to preserve an integrated

sense of identity.<sup>(14)</sup> For “high functioning” autistic persons, this shielding may take the form of exceedingly effective social performance that can leave both self and other with a sensation of loss or failure. This experience is described over and over in autism auto/biography. Donna Williams, for instance, writes of engaging fully formed but non-integrated performance personalities to engage with the world on her behalf, often leaving her teachers, family, and employers baffled and enraged (*Nobody Nowhere*). Dawn Prince-Hughes, seeking to engage in a love relationship, speaks of conducting an intensive field study of human sexuality, developing “protocols” and applying “data” that lead her to some problematic conclusions, including the explicit idea “that my own sexual pleasure was irrelevant” (80-81). Needless to say, her spectacular sexual performances, while bringing much gratification to her lovers, do not result in mutual satisfaction.

<13>Within *Jane Eyre*, there is substantial evidence that Jane, too, participates in similar autistically informed social exchanges. In adulthood, as Jane exerts increasing control over her passionate emotional life, reducing her affect and concealing her deeply rooted feelings with ever greater success, experienced readers tend to contextualize this process in terms of cultural history, understanding the narrator’s extreme self-control, her apparent poise, as meshing with historically appropriate social conventions. Readers know, as Jane does, that a Victorian gentlewoman must not evidence feelings of passion, must not put herself forward, must not be seen to harbor ideas or opinions that are beyond her limited social scope. Because the reader experiences Jane’s self-control from the inside, though, he always sees the roiling passions and rarely notices or questions the narrator’s most obvious autistic characteristic, the silence and flattened affect, the autistic remoteness that other characters clearly experience. This is quite apparent in the festive drawing room scenes in which Jane is clearly portrayed as dreading to appear before company: Rochester and Mrs. Fairfax both anticipate Jane’s objection to participating in social gatherings and the latter offers friendly advice on how best to avoid the crowd: “I’ll tell you how to manage so as to avoid the embarrassment of making a formal entrance, which is the most disagreeable part of the business. You must go into the drawing-room while it is empty, before the ladies leave the dinner-table; choose your seat in any quiet nook you like; you need not stay long after the gentlemen come in” (169; ch. 17). Within these scenes, the reader typically sees Jane as planting herself quite literally on the margins: “I sit in the shade—in any shade there be in this brilliantly-lit apartment; the window-curtain half hides me” (173; ch. 17). Even in the social exchanges that feel more natural to the reader, however, Jane’s affective idiosyncrasies are evident upon close reading. When she addresses Grace Poole, for instance, after the fire in Rochester’s room, hinting at what she thinks is a shared secret, Jane may look arch to the reader, but for outsiders—all the other characters with whom the governess is interacting—her manner must seem haughty, even bizarre. Leah, a witness to the dialogue between Jane and Grace Poole, must find the governess’ behavior inexplicable, as she whispers closely with a servant far beneath her, a person for whom she has always shown contempt. Even Grace’s reaction—Jane tells us that “there was something of consciousness” in the expression of the servant’s eyes—suggests the possibility that she finds Jane’s intimations a little weird (154; ch. 16).

<14>In fact, Mrs. Fairfax, the one person at Thornfield who is truly Jane’s social equal and with whom she would seem most naturally to fall into companionship, obviously finds Jane strange and bewildering, despite the older woman’s warm feelings. The scene in which Jane first asks

Mrs. Fairfax about Rochester's character offers a telling sample of many of their other interactions. After prodding the housekeeper repeatedly for some concrete, meaningful, detailed sense of Mr. Rochester, Jane ultimately gives up unsatisfied, commenting to the reader:

There are people who seem to have no notion of sketching a character, or observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things: the good lady evidently belonged to this class; *my queries puzzled, but did not draw her out*. Mr. Rochester was Mr. Rochester in her eyes; a gentleman, a landed proprietor—nothing more: she inquired and searched no further, and *evidently wondered at my wish* to gain a more definite notion of his identity. (105; ch. 11; emphasis added)

Jane's queries puzzle Mrs. Fairfax, but they do not elicit information, and because Jane does the telling, it is Mrs. Fairfax who here appears deficient, lacking in natural curiosity or powers of observation. Narrated from without, however, it is easy to see how Jane's distant sense of Mrs. Fairfax's puzzlement and wonder might be translated into an understanding of the governess's queries as peculiar or socially untoward.

<15>Even in her most passionate exchange with Rochester himself, the one person who “gets” her, who connects with the real, with the unperformed Jane, she demonstrates an unusually perceptive understanding of her apparent affect and an incisive sense of how others must read her. In the dialogue that leads up to this first engagement, Jane shouts angrily at Rochester, repeatedly affirming that she *does* have feelings, and pointedly announcing that she is not “an automaton” (253; ch. 23). It is an assurance that seems fitting to the reader, who shares Jane's rage and frustration over Rochester's teasing and erotic game-playing, but it bespeaks as well a powerful underlying defensive posture, an insistence on her identity as a feeling human being despite persistent social misreading.(15)

<16>Like contemporary autistic autobiographers and autism writers, Jane also demonstrates a strong sense of attachment to a specific arena existing apart from social convention and obligation. For some autistic persons, this realm is numerical, linguistic, or animal, with myriad overlappings of interest or savant talent. While the sphere of human social interaction may seem to the autistic person to operate by codes that are invisible and unfathomable, the area of special talent is typically experienced as enriched, having a depth or dimension beyond that experienced by neurotypical individuals.(16) So, Daniel Tammet writes of his synesthetic experience of the numerical world, where numbers have for him distinct personalities, including explicit identifying colors and size/shape characteristics. Oliver Sacks describes a conversation in prime numbers between savant twins, like two connoisseurs, each savoring the purely numerical exchange (“The Twins” 201-204). Dawn Prince-Hughes is finally able to decode and replicate human social behaviors through an intense intuitive relationship with gorillas. For a great number of autistic persons, however, the area of enriched skill and interest is visual in nature. Countless autobiographical sources attest to this widespread visual orientation among autistic persons. Temple Grandin writes specifically about “thinking in pictures”; Stephen Wiltshire, an accomplished artist from childhood, has had significant public success, including the publication of book-length collections of his work; and another visually oriented autistic person, the incompletely identified “José” from Oliver Sacks' “The Autist Artist,” is seen to harbor an

astonishing visual intuition, his drawings “richly expressive” and filled with roguish humor despite the fact that he is regarded by the attendants of his institutional home as an “idiot” and “hopelessly retarded” (214). For many autistic persons, the visual world simply feels more real, more concrete, more authentic, than the seemingly random social interactions of a babbling humanity.

<17>Given this context, it is not difficult to see how Jane’s unmistakable visual orientation and artistic skill help to locate her on the spectrum. Indeed, Jane’s visuality has provided fertile ground for critical and theoretical exploration. Among the many who have observed the narrator’s exceptional visuality, Antonia Losano has described the crucial connection between Jane’s visual and narrative proclivities, and Carla Peterson sees Jane’s favoring of landscape over verbal caption as a feminist gesture. From the moment Jane introduces herself, leafing through Bewick’s *History of British Birds* “for the letter-press of which,” she declares, she “cared little” (8; ch. 1), the reader is confronted with the narrator’s devotion to the visual and her ability to concentrate herself entirely, to enter into an almost altered state when visually occupied. The report Jane makes to Rochester about working on the pieces he finds in her portfolio is telling: ““To paint them,”” she says, ““was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known. [...] I sat at them from morning till noon, and from noon till night: the length of the midsummer days favoured my inclination to apply” (126; ch. 13). Again and again, artistic creation is seen as Jane’s solace, a firm place to stand in unstable or unfriendly territory. Revisiting the “hostile” home of her youth, the mature Jane is once again shunned by her cousins, but she finds “occupation and amusement” in drawing, winning the unsought admiration of Georgiana and Eliza, both of whom come to recognize Jane as a social equal because of her evident artistic gift (ch. 21). Generally dismissive of feminine beauty, Jane’s artist self connects eagerly with the “model” in qualitatively different terms from those of the social human subject. Otherwise uninterested in the charms and social graces of Rosamond, her cousin St. John’s love object, Jane nevertheless feels “a thrill of artist-delight at the idea of copying from so perfect and radiant a model. [...] I took a sheet of fine card-board, and drew a careful outline. I promised myself the pleasure of colouring it; and, as it was getting late then, I told her she must come and sit another day” (369; ch. 32). Like many other autistic personalities, Jane feels secure in her visual sense and her work as an artist, even when the demands of interpersonal contact challenge or threaten her individual autistic integrity.

\* \* \*

<18>And it is around the idea of autistic integrity that it becomes possible to reread one of the great issues of *Jane Eyre*. While millions of readers have relished the text and countless critics have analyzed its merits, there remains a sense for many readers, amateur and professional, that the narrator’s general remoteness and her ultimate retreat to Ferndean, in particular, are subjects for justifiable critique. Many theorists—Gayatri Spivak and Nancy Armstrong most notably—have suggested that Jane’s “individualism” (or the individualism which she is seen to represent) embodies a kind of anti-social selfishness, that her aloneness and the appeal of such aloneness for the reader represent a dangerous indulgence, a shuffling off of social and political responsibility

that is damaging to others, possibly even murderous. Read as a manifestation of political isolationism, Jane becomes a culpable character, a passive agent of imperialism, a feminist reactionary who rejects the need for political solidarity. The difficulty with such an interpretation, even while it contributes to our understanding of the text and of our world, is that it fails to consider that the individual, even when she acts alone, is a political creature. Jane's aloofness and social idiosyncrasy are not a belligerent confrontation of outsiders; the making of her home at Ferndean is not a wholesale rejection of humanity; and, most decidedly, her marriage to Rochester does not make her responsible for the imprisonment and death of the Creole Bertha Mason or of the imperialist outrages perpetrated by her husband's family. The putting forward of such claims is to suggest a similar critique of tremendous political progressives like Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Henry David Thoreau, whose lives both point to the political importance of solitude.

<19>I would argue, in fact, that individuals in retreat or acting independently have been among the chief proponents of political and social change. When, in "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau explains his refusal to pay taxes, his non-involvement is described as a perfectly deliberate political act:

It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to *refuse allegiance* to the State, to *withdraw and stand aloof* from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man a musket to shoot one with—the dollar is innocent—but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I *quietly* declare war with the State, *after my fashion*, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her I can, as is usual in such cases. (131; emphasis added)

Like Rousseau and like Thoreau, like Emerson and Wordsworth, Jane Eyre is a writer, influencing the greater world through her publication, but even without this very concrete contribution, her privileging of her own autism, her recognition and accommodation of this foundational aspect of her identity, should be recognized as a legitimate political gesture. Collective political action is a necessary and productive means of effecting social change, but the insistence that every individual act collectively is nothing short of totalitarian.

<20>In acting to preserve the autistic self, Jane's behavior may be regarded as an active form of resistance to the autistic outcomes that predominate in her world. For Jane Eyre, in her aloneness, is not an only in the tale she narrates. Having explored the parameters of autistic personality, it becomes possible to mine the text further for additional examples of individuals on the spectrum. Unsurprisingly, Jane's cousins also demonstrate autistic characteristics: The single-minded St. John, a gifted linguist, makes a virtue of denying his love for Rosamond and courts his cousin Jane even though his affection for her appears purely theoretical or "ceremonial" (398; ch. 34); Jane's rigid and narrow-minded cousin Eliza approaches life according to a deliberate "system," whereby she divides each day into "sections" and assigns to each its "task" (236; ch. 21). Apart from these is Bertha Mason, imprisoned—speechless—in the windowless attic room at Thornfield, a tempting human "enigma"; clearly, the so-called madwoman demonstrates what Leo Kanner identifies as "disturbances of affective contact." And for each of these individuals, Jane points to a punishing conclusion: St. John closes the text with a passionate expression of longing for his own death ("even so come, Lord Jesus!") [452; ch. 38]); cousin Eliza, despite

her “sense,” is “walled up alive in a French convent” (242; ch. 21); and Bertha, of course, is dead by her own hand. Without the strength and will to resist the world and build a functional private space, the autistic individual is prone to imprisonment and extermination. Resistance to the encroaching world, and to tyrannical expectations of compulsory sociality, is necessary to autistic survival and self-determination. From this perspective, Jane achieves tremendous political stature, becoming a model for effective resistance to social control, her private fecundity seeding possibilities for oppressed and marginalized peoples, especially autistic persons, outside the sphere of her immediate control.

#### Endnotes

(1)The isolation of Ferndean has been a favored theme of many other scholars as well, including Edgar F. Shannon, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Parama Roy, and Pauline Nestor. Yoshiaki Shirai offers a reading of Ferndean that is particularly compelling when considering the autism of the text. Shirai proposes that Ferndean be understood in light of the mid-19th century “fern craze” or pteridomania, and that it be seen as representing “an ideal space like a Wardian case” (a specially manufactured glass enclosure used to maintain a pure and wholesome environment for ferns). This case “encloses Jane and Rochester” and preserves them from “noise” (129).(^)

(2)All quotations from *Jane Eyre* within these pages are referenced as follows: The initial page number is from the Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel identified in the list of Works Cited; the chapter number which follows relies on a full sequential numbering of all chapters as is typically used in popular editions of the text. In case any confusion arises, the author suggests consulting the etext version available through Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1260>).(^)

(3)Stuart Murray observes that reading autism as “enigmatic” is a dominant convention for representing autism “even ... [in] well-respected” autism literature (26 & 42f5).(^)

(4)These popular sources are so ubiquitous that none is singled out here for individual attribution.(^)

(5)While the argument that follows urges readers to understand autism in terms of a spectrum of identity (rather than a rigidly circumscribed impairment), it should be noted here that even positive representations of autism (usually as Asperger syndrome) are often poisoned by conventions that transform the autistic character into a sentimental icon or a stereotype of spectacular skill without full human identity. Stuart Murray’s “Autism and the Contemporary Sentimental” offers an admirable assessment of this ground, observing that the autistic character

in contemporary film and fiction is frequently portrayed to create an “effect of wonder at the level of human difference” (30).(^)

(6)Negative stereotypes of autism are an ever-present challenge, even within literature that is otherwise sensitive and well-informed. As autism becomes an increasing social presence, however, there is greater recognition of the assets and contributions of people on the spectrum. A recent article in *WIRED* magazine notes the spike in autism diagnoses in California’s Silicon Valley and attributes this surge to the concentration of techie “geeks” whose intermarriage and reproduction has genetically reinforced the incidence of autism. While considering the disadvantages that arise in such a situation, writer Steve Silberman nevertheless recognizes that autism is linked to specialized forms of intelligence and productivity, quoting Temple Grandin’s observation, for instance, that NASA is likely “the largest sheltered workshop in the world,” commenting on the prevalence of autistic types in “the halls of academe,” and noting: “It’s a familiar joke in the industry that many of the hardcore programmers in IT strongholds like Intel, Adobe, and Silicon Graphics—coming to work early, leaving late, sucking down Big Gulps in their cubicles while they code for hours—are residing somewhere in Asperger’s domain.”(^)

(7)Both Kanner and Asperger use the term “autism” to describe their observations and, while Asperger’s work tends to look at individuals who are considered to be “high functioning,” there is certainly room in Kanner’s initial study for the inclusion of the amply intelligent and the highly verbal, the key distinction made in the DSM between autism and Asperger syndrome being one of verbal development and ability. Kanner notes of those children who made up his initial eleven “cases”: “Even though most of these children were at one time or another looked upon as feebleminded, they are all unquestionably endowed with good cognitive potentialities” (47). For the purposes of this paper, no further explicit distinction is made between the contested categories of autism and Asperger syndrome.(^)

(8)These diagnostic criteria are abstracted from the DSM. They are incomplete and mingle the autism and Asperger categories established by the DSM as distinct “syndromes.” In addition, some criteria have been edited or partially paraphrased, but in each case, the writer has remained true to the apparent intended sense of the source.(^)

(9)The thinking for this essay is indebted in general terms to the work of scholars in Disability Studies. This passage, in particular, is obviously influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, but the observation that “normalcy” may be a tyrannical social force echoes the work of scholar Lennard J. Davis.(^)

(10)For more information see Kathleen Seidel’s excellent neurodiversity resources at [neurodiversity.com](http://neurodiversity.com).(^)

(11)It is with some hesitation that I include Oliver Sacks in the canon of autism literature. This intensely imaginative writer has made important inroads into understanding and explaining autism in language that is at once complex and accessible, yet he has not enjoyed great popularity within the disability community and his work has been the subject of powerful critique by disability scholars. Most notably, bioethicist and medical sociologist Tom

Shakespeare has satirized Sacks as “the man who mistook his patients for a literary career.” (One of Sacks’s best-known books is entitled *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.) And G. Thomas Couser has also made a persuasive case for understanding Sacks’s work as exploitative. Despite his contested role in the representation of disability, Sacks has made a brilliant, if flawed, contribution to our understanding of neurodiversity and very often writes of disability in terms of creativity, talent, and giftedness. Even while participating in potentially damaging diagnostic activities, he has himself recognized and worked to counteract the deficit model of disability which is elsewhere so entrenched an aspect of medicalized disability. Moreover, an analysis of Sacks’s character, as it emerges in his writing and the public aspects of his life, indicates that he, too, may well be thought of as an individual on the spectrum. While it may not be a popular move, given these considerations, including Sacks within this list of other autism writers, seems reasonable and valid.^(^)

(12)Due to space constraints, the theme of peace and autistic ordering cannot be fully developed within these pages, however, one might briefly consider the joy that Jane claims in the thorough cleaning of Moor House. As she tells her cousin St. John,

“My first aim will be to *clean down* (do you comprehend the full force of the expression?)— to *clean down* Moor House from chamber to cellar; my next to rub it up with bees-wax, oil, and an indefinite number of cloths, till it glitters again; my third, to arrange every chair, table, bed, carpet, with mathematical precision; afterwards I shall go near to ruin you in coals and peat to keep up good fires in every room; and lastly, the two days preceding that on which your sisters are expected will be devoted by Hannah and me to such a beating of eggs, sorting of currants, grating of spices, compounding of Christmas cakes, chopping up of materials for mince-pies, and solemnising of other culinary rites, as words can convey but an inadequate notion of to the uninitiated like you. My purpose, in short, is to have all things in an absolutely perfect state of readiness for Diana and Mary before next Thursday; and my ambition is to give them a beau-ideal of a welcome when they come.” (390; ch 34)

This passage may fruitfully be compared with one from Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere*. Williams describes an early job working as a clerk in a department store as

paradise, surrounded by racks and shelves of colored garments, shiny shoes, rows of numerically ordered packages. Everything was arranged in aisles. It seemed almost unbelievable that I would be expected to do the thing I loved most: put things in order. There were numbers to be counted and ordered, there were colors and sizes and types of article to be grouped; every department was kept separate from every other department and called by a different name; it was a world of guarantees. (82-83)

In each instance, the listing of activities is an almost religious encounter, a litany that speaks to “an absolutely perfect state.”^(^)

(13)See, for example, Oliver Sacks’ “An Anthropologist on Mars,” Donna Williams’ *Somebody Somewhere*, and Dawn Prince-Hughes’ *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*.^(^)

(14) One finds, for instance, that autism is frequently described from the inside not as a lack or failure of feeling. Quite the contrary: Autistic persons seem to experience the most intense sensations and emotions, while “neurotypicals” typically misrecognize these experiences because they occur outside conventional limits or expectations. One example is the young mother, weeping over her apparent lack relationship with her young autistic son in Keiko Tobe’s deftly composed graphic novel *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child* (2007). While the mother watches another couple play with their young child in the park, she is consumed with agony, thinking “my feelings don’t reach him” and desperately looking for a spoken response (“if he answers me just once ...”). She is then surprised when the toddler silently lays a trail of wildflowers at her feet. In this instance, the lesson is clear: The child does feel and the mother’s feelings do “reach him” if she can get past the expectation of a conventional response (82-83).

Donna Williams’ *Somebody Somewhere* (1994) describes another scenario, witnessing what she regards as the virtual torture of a young autistic child overstimulated by well-meaning teachers. Looking on with intense feelings of identification as a fellow autist, Williams describes their effort to “get through” to the four-year-old girl: “the two supervising staff ... bombarded her personal space with their bodies, their breath, their smells, their laughter, their movement, and their noise.” In response, “the little girl screamed and rocked, her arms up against her ears to keep their noise out and her eyes crossed to block out the bombardment of visual noise. I watched these people and wished they knew what sensory hell was. I was watching a torture where the victim had no ability to fight back in any comprehensible language” (25).(^)

(15) Another scene that speaks compellingly of Jane’s autistic affect is that in which her marriage to Rochester is called off, she is exposed to Bertha Mason, and is then left to manage her feelings in solitude. While the reader is offered an understanding of Jane as a person in shock, her absolute lack of affect and effective communication in this process are also strongly suggestive of an autistic personality. Upon the public announcement in the church that Rochester is already married and that his wife is living, Jane’s reaction is all internal: “My nerves vibrated to those low-spoken words as they had never vibrated to thunder—my blood felt their subtle violence as it had never felt frost or fire; but I was collected, and in no danger of swooning” (289; ch. 26). When presented with the violent spectacle of Rochester and Bertha, Jane continues silent and apparently calm, Rochester observing that Jane “stands ... grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon” (294; ch. 26). And when, at last, Jane emerges from the solitude of her chamber, to which she has immediately after retreated, Rochester observes, “I have been waiting for you long, and listening: yet not one movement have I heard, nor one sob: five minutes more of that death-like hush, and I should have forced the lock like a burglar. So you shun me?—you shut yourself up and grieve alone! I would rather you had come and upbraided me with vehemence. You are passionate. I expected a scene of some kind. I was prepared for the hot rain of tears; only I wanted them to be shed on my breast: now a senseless floor has received them, or your drenched handkerchief. But I err: you have not wept at all! I see a white cheek and a faded eye, but no trace of tears.” Even Jane’s forgiveness here is offered silently: “I forgave him all,” she writes, “yet not in words, not outwardly; only at my heart’s core” (298; ch. 27).(^)

(16) Describing this aspect of autism from the context of a medical model, Oliver Sacks writes, “‘Isolated islands of proficiency’ and ‘splinter skills’ are spoken of in the literature” (“Autist Artist” 219).(^)

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I think Jane Eyre is principled and strong willed. She is capable of strong emotions. She is also able to forgive those who wronged her. For example, her aunt, Aunt Reed, shut her up in a room when to teach her to 'behave better', causing intense ... However, this is a vitally important fact because we know that Jane cannot rely on the methods sometimes employed by ultra good looking people to get ahead in life. Things do not come easy to her. Her character has been tested by being an abandoned child, unloved, unwan. Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel. Other examples of this form include Great Expectations by Charles Dickens, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, and The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger. Jane Eyre is a typical coming-of-age novel in that its main character, Jane, is young, brave, and resourceful in the face of difficulty and even danger. Jane Eyre is a gothic novel. Gothic novels focus on the mysterious; take place in dark, sometimes exotic, settings (often houses that appear to be haunted); but still entail an element of romance. The double is a frequent feature of the Gothic novel, and in a sense Jane and the madwoman in Rochester's attic are doubles "two wives, one of sound mind and the other insane. Start studying Jane Eyre Study Guide. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. Explain the function of the Gytrash and its effects on the text. Evaluate Bronte's use of supernatural elements in this chapter and their effects. Provide examples from the text to support your ideas. Jane sees Rochester and his large dog, the inclusion reinforces Jane's unconventional thoughts and character in that she considers life with the supernatural in mind. Explain the purpose and effect of the diction in Chapter 13; it changes from informal to formal. Dinner with Mr. Rochester is more informal where learning Rochester's dark past is more formal.