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Emily Eells

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The French aire in Jane Eyre

L'aire de la langue française dans Jane Eyre

Emily Eells

- 1 The French language figures so prominently in Charlotte Brontë's novels that it prompted a reviewer of the first volume of *Shirley* (1849) to dismiss it as incomprehensible, complaining that it was written 'half in French and half in broad Yorkshire.'¹ Though this is clearly an exaggeration, Brontë does indulge in a kind of 'plaisir des mots' using French words when she finds them more suggestive than their English counterparts, as for example in this evocation of a wintery landscape in *Shirley*: 'A calm day had settled into crystalline evening: the world wore a North Pole colouring: all its lights and tints looked like the 'reflets' of white, or violet, or pale green gems.' (*Shirley*, 527). Brontë annotates her use of the French word 'reflets', challenging the reader to propose an English equivalent that conveys its expressive sense: 'Find me an English word as good, reader, and I will gladly dispense with the French word. Reflections won't do.' (*Shirley*, 527). French lessons are pivotal to the plot of *Shirley*, as they are in Brontë's first novel *The Professor* (written in 1846) which, like her later novel *Villette* (1853), is based on her own experience of learning French at Professor Héger's boarding school in Brussels. The numbered occurrences of French in *Jane Eyre* (1847) might read as merely ornamental and circumstantial, but closer analysis reveals that they are eloquent in encoding issues of gender and education, and in voicing the conflict of individualism and conformity in a Victorian context. True to cliché, it is the language of romance from which Rochester borrows to relate his 'grande passion' for Céline Varens (*Jane Eyre*, 120). As the love affair took place in Paris where the mode of transportation was *la voiture* and the entrance to Céline's apartment *une porte cochère*, his narrative is necessarily punctuated with French words and terms of endearment like 'mon ange'. It is also natural that Céline's illegitimate, Parisian-born daughter Adèle should speak French: her effervescent use of the language contrasts with the austerity of Victorian England and functions as a constant reminder of Paris, stigmatized as a hotbed of loose morals. Adèle's French laces the text, embellishing it with frivolity. None more so than when she receives her 'boîte', or 'cadeau', which she opens with boundless, uncontrollable excitement (*Jane Eyre*, 110). It

contains something hidden and unknown, but Rochester deflates her enthusiasm when he sarcastically instructs her to ‘disembowel’ it without giving ‘any details of the anatomical process, or any notice of the condition of the entrails’ (*Jane Eyre*, 110). Adèle’s ‘boîte’ can serve as an image of what I propose to do in this paper, namely to unwrap Brontë’s uses of French in order to reveal its hidden meaning. Elaine Showalter has already argued that the French in the novel is associated with ‘the illicit, self-indulgent, and dangerous’, and that it is used ‘consistently and successfully as an objective counterpart to Jane’s sexual response to Rochester.’ (Showalter 228). Although Jane’s incipient romance with Rochester begins with a ‘rencontre’ on the stairs (*Jane Eyre*, 110), their relationship is not characterized by the use of French. On the contrary, Jane does not echo Céline Varens’s praise of Rochester’s ‘taille d’athlète’ (*Jane Eyre*, 120) or his ‘beauté mâle’; rather she tells him ‘point blank’ that she does not find him good-looking. French however does allow Jane to consolidate her identity and role as a woman, especially in her relationship with Rochester.

- 2 Some critics have detected an encoding of French in the name of the eponymous heroine. Her initials spell the French pronoun ‘je’ and thus announce her status as first person narrator, and subject of the autobiography the novel purports to be, though the only evidence that this may have been intentional on Brontë’s part is that Jane is identified as ‘J.E.’ in her correspondence with her future employer at Thornfield (*Jane Eyre*, 73-75). Jane’s surname is homophonous with the French letter ‘R’, which maps her search for a family, from her rejection of the Reeds and her affirmation that she is Jane Eyre, to her adoption by the Rivers and her final status as Mrs Rochester. Adèle claims to have difficulty pronouncing ‘Eyre’, though she succeeds perfectly when she transliterates it into French: ‘Aire? Bah! I cannot say it’ (*Jane Eyre*, 86). Brontë’s introduction of the polysemous French word ‘aire’ is charged with significance here, as it means eyrie, or eagles’ nest, and thus adds to the ornithological lexicon which wings its way through the novel, starting on the first page where Jane is absorbed in her reading of Bewick’s *History of British Birds*. There are several pronunciations of ‘eyrie’ in English, but there is an indication that Brontë intended it to be homophonous with Jane’s family name, as she creates an echo between it and the conjunction ‘ere’ in the passage referring to Mason’s attack by Bertha:

whatever being had uttered that fearful shriek could not soon repeat it: not the widest-winged condor on the Andes could, twice in succession, send out such a yell from the cloud shrouding his eyrie. The thing delivering such utterance must rest ere it could repeat the effort. (*Jane Eyre*, 175, my emphasis)

- 3 In French, ‘aire’ also denotes an area or space, so Jane’s surname could be interpreted as a reference to her search for what one could call, paraphrasing Virginia Woolf, a space of her own.
- 4 This paper proposes to tease out the significance of Brontë’s use of French, beginning with a reflection on how French is related to gender issues and women’s freedom of speech, before analyzing how it is also associated with the exercise of self-government and conformity to Victorian propriety. In the last part, I will consider how French is used to negotiate the tensions of reason and passion, fantasy and reality, which conclude with a triumph of English over French values.

Liberté, égalité, sororité

- 5 French has the value of a passport to freedom of speech in Brontë's novels. Some of Brontë's earliest compositions were in French,² and the foreign language served as an initiation to creative writing. Written exercises in French spelt empowerment³ and enabled her to forge a language of her own, while at the same time imposing a discipline. During her time at Professor Héger's boarding school in Brussels in 1842 and 1843, she wrote a large number of essays in French and translated poems, including Louis Belmontet's *Les Petits Orphelins*, which reads as a preparatory text for *Jane Eyre*.⁴ The lament of two young orphans forsaken on a cold winter night and left to die in the porch of the church resonates with strains from Bessie's ballad of the 'Poor orphan child' (*Jane Eyre*, 17-18), and the hunger and cold Jane herself endures on the moors in chapter 28 of the novel.
- 6 *Jane Eyre* is presented as an edited autobiography and can be read as an account of how Jane learns to hold her tongue. She masters her speech so that she is able to pen the measured prose of her narrative. She gains liberty of expression through her knowledge of French. When the young Jane Eyre is incensed by the unjust treatment she feels she has received at Gateshead, she expresses her anger by translating an expression from French: 'I was a trifle beside myself; or rather out of myself, as the French would say' (*Jane Eyre*, 9). Jane is no longer herself: she is another, an outsider who uses foreign expressions to define herself. Her impassioned revolt as a child is reformulated when she is a young woman at Thornfield, couched in political terms and set against the backdrop of the 1848 Revolution in France. That rebellion against the Orléans monarchy, which led to the creation of the Second Republic, involved class conflict which Brontë uses as to suggest a parallel with tension between the genders, in the following allusion to women who are suffering in silence: 'Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth' (*Jane Eyre*, 93). The political rebellion in France brought about social equality for the working classes, just as Jane seems to advocate equality and freedom of expression for women. France and the French language are built into her struggle for social emancipation as a woman.
- 7 Equality is achieved through education and learning French is an integral part of Jane's education. When Bessie first speaks of Jane's going to school, she mentions the French books that she will have to translate, making French into the core of her curriculum. At Lowood School, Jane learns to express herself through drawing and French. Significantly, *être* is the first French verb she learns, as if the foreign language were endowing her with new life (*Jane Eyre*, 63).⁵ Jane's proficiency in French also secures her a position in society, as she has the necessary credentials to work as Adèle's governess at Thornfield Hall. French is a mark of accomplishment and raises her social status, prompting Bessie to comment when she learns that Jane can read and speak it: 'you are quite a lady' (*Jane Eyre*, 78). Indeed, French is spoken by the educated ladies, as is confirmed by the narrator who specifies that Blanche Ingram speaks French to her mother (*Jane Eyre*, 147).
- 8 At Thornfield, Jane finds herself in a French-speaking community, a kind of sorority composed of Adèle and her maid Sophie. Although Sophie is tight-lipped and distant (*Jane Eyre*, 94), and says no more than 'bon soir' when Jane returns to Thornfield after her aunt's death (*Jane Eyre*, 209), her presence is a constant reminder of the opening up of a

French linguistic space within the narrative. French is used in this community of women as a language of sympathy, for example in the passage following the night Rochester's bed went up in flames. As Jane speculates in her mind why Rochester protects Grace Poole, Adèle notes her state of confusion and expresses her concern for Jane using the French language: 'vos doigts tremblent comme la feuille' (*Jane Eyre*, 133).

- 9 Adèle's use of French could at first be dismissed as the language she naturally uses in everyday circumstances. Her references to meals indicate that she is hungry, starting with her spontaneous comment as she goes into dinner on Jane's first day at Thornfield: 'J'ai bien faim, moi !' (*Jane Eyre*, 92). Similarly, when Jane asks her during the house party: 'Don't you feel hungry, Adèle?', she responds: 'Mais oui, mademoiselle: voilà cinq ou six heures que nous n'avons pas mangé' (*Jane Eyre*, 142). Adèle's comments carry deeper meaning than simply a statement about her hunger levels as, to quote Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in this novel 'hunger is inextricably linked to rebellion and rage' (Gilbert and Gubar 373).
- 10 Adèle's preoccupation with her *toilettes* corresponds to a French stereotype, but her superficiality acts as a cover-up of the deeper sense of incompleteness shared by the female characters in the novel. Adèle feels that her outfit needs the addition of a rose to set it off, or to 'compléter [s]a toilette', as she says in French (*Jane Eyre*, 145). Once the rose is secured, she 'sighed a sigh of ineffable satisfaction, as if her cup of happiness were now full.' Adèle's hyperbolic sense of fulfilment here acts as a frivolous counterpart of Jane's search for completion on a deeper level. Jane suffers from the feeling that something is lacking in her existence and is restless and dissatisfied as a consequence. Adèle's superficial needs therefore transpose Jane's hunger to another register, and use of the French language means that serious issues can be dealt with lightly—apparently in passing.
- 11 The community of French speakers in Thornfield includes Mr Rochester, who intrudes into the sorority, conscious that he is speaking a foreign language. He explicitly excuses his use of French when he narrates his affair with Adèle's mother to Jane: 'I liked bonbons too in those days, Miss Eyre, and I was *croquant*—overlook the barbarism—*croquant* chocolate comfits, and smoking alternately . . .' (*Jane Eyre*, 120-121). The polysemy of the parenthetical injunction to 'overlook the barbarism' is Rochester's double apology for contaminating his English with a French word, but also for inelegantly crunching the sweets. His use of the word 'barbarism' introduces a notion of alterity and points to the difference between French and English modes of behaviour and moral values. Rochester is also smoking when he pronounces the French phrase cited as the title of the next part of this paper: 'I want to smoke, Jane, or a pinch of snuff to comfort me under all this, "pour me donner une contenance," as Adèle would say' (*Jane Eyre*, 231). This is one of several occurrences where Rochester associates French with smoking, thereby suggesting how the foreign language acts as a kind of smoke screen, hiding the unsaid or the improper.

Se donner une contenance, As Adèle Would Say

- 12 The French phrase 'se donner une contenance' conveys a notion of composure and self-discipline. Rochester relies on smoking and explaining his actions in French as a means of steadying himself and restraining his emotions in the heat of his argument with Jane over her status as a governess, which he qualifies as 'governessing slavery'. Rochester has

recourse to French to control himself when faced with Jane's outrage at the suggestion that she be treated like a slave in his harem. He seeks to assume a 'contenance', a French term sharing the etymology of the verb 'to contain'. He uses the French language to constrain himself and to stay within the boundaries of social propriety. Similarly, in the penultimate chapter he uses French in an effort to contain his jealousy, as can be seen in his reaction when he learns that Jane's cousin and suitor, St John Rivers, is only 29 years old: 'jeune encore, as the French say' (*Jane Eyre*, 375).

- 13 Therefore, although learning French has secured a job for Jane and brought her some independence, the language is also used to restrain and constrain emotions. Paradoxically, French is associated not with spontaneity and excitement but with the quintessentially Victorian values of self-government and earnestness. Learning the language with Madame Pierrot at Lowood involved daily training for Jane, which lasted for no fewer than seven years during which she learnt: 'a portion of French by heart daily' by, as she says, 'applying myself to take pains with my accent, and imitating as closely as possible the pronunciation of my Teacher' (*Jane Eyre*, 86). It is significant that the first French phrase Jane uses in her voice as narrator is an expression of propriety: it occurs when she recalls her concerns that by seeking economic independence through employment she might be compromising her social reputation, or going against the grain of acceptable Victorian behaviour. She uses a triadic structure culminating with a French phrase to voice her worries of the consequences of the fact that she is acting 'by [her] own guidance' as she wants things to be 'respectable, proper, *en règle*' (*Jane Eyre*, 75). Equally, Rochester's first use of French is to discipline Adèle when she opens her present: 'let your operation be conducted in silence: tiens-toi tranquille, enfant; comprends-tu?' (*Jane Eyre*, 110).

- 14 For Adèle, French imposes discipline more than it incites creativity. She uses the language derivatively and in imitation of her mother who had schooled her. Hence, when showing off her new dress and performing a dance for Rochester, she asks Rochester to corroborate that she has acted like her mother: 'spreading out her dress, she chasséed across the room, she wheeled lightly around in front of Mr Rochester and dropped on one knee at his feet: "C'est comme cela que maman faisait, n'est-ce pas, monsieur?"' (*Jane Eyre*, 119). Adèle's mother teaches her to recite her party piece with accompanying gestures, and when she performs it for Jane, she begins by 'assuming an attitude', a possible English translation of 'se donnant une contenance':

Assuming an attitude, she began, 'La Ligue des Rats: fable de La Fontaine.' She then declaimed the little piece with an attention to punctuation and emphasis, a flexibility of voice and an appropriateness of gesture, very unusual indeed at her age, and which proved she had been carefully trained. (*Jane Eyre*, 87)

- 15 In Brontë's narrative, the foreign language is used to convey a sense of performance and to suggest that the characters are playing a role in society, where they conceal their true selves behind a mask. This function of the foreign language is introduced by Jane's French teacher Madame Pierrot, whose name derives from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition and refers to a character identified by the white mask. Things French are stigmatized as artificial and deceptive, as is made evident in the repeated use of the fricative 'f' to translate disapproval of Mrs Brocklehurst's 'false front of French curls' (*Jane Eyre*, 55). During the house party at Thornfield, the characters assume different attitudes defined through foreign terms: when Blanche Ingram proposes to accompany Rochester as he sings, she addresses him as 'Signor Eduardo' and he responds by calling her 'Donna

Bianca' (*Jane Eyre*, 152). The other house guests are also portrayed using foreign words: Louisa Eshton's pretty face is 'of that order that the French term "minois chiffonné"' (*Jane Eyre*, 146) and her father has 'something of the appearance of a "père noble de théâtre"' given his white hair and his dark eyebrows and whiskers (*Jane Eyre*, 148). By describing these guests using foreign terms, Jane the narrator is both marking their social difference and also suggesting that they are playing a role.

- 16 Adèle's use of French reveals her attitude towards people: she elevates her guardian to the rank of French aristocrat with her addition of the particle to his name: M. Edouard Fairfax de Rochester (*Jane Eyre*, 101) and affectionately grants her governess French citizenship when she addresses her with the diminutive French form of her name: Jeannette (*Jane Eyre*, 94).
- 17 The foreign acts as a mask—or smoke screen—to the real thrust of the discussion. The military term 'smoke screen' denotes the cloud of smoke produced by artificial means to obscure movements or positions of the troops and is used figuratively to suggest that the truth is hidden. Rochester adopts the strategy of using French as part of a complex subterfuge put into place when Jane returns to Thornfield after the death of Mrs Reed. He conceals his intention of proposing to her, first of all by referring to the carriage he has ordered for Mrs Rochester, without naming the woman he intends for that title (*Jane Eyre*, 209). He then modifies Jane's relationship to Mrs Fairfax by casting her in the role of adoptive mother (*Jane Eyre*, 210). He finally resorts to French to suggest a redefinition of his relationship with Jane when he points out that Adèle is so overjoyed to see her again that she looks like she is 'prête à croquer sa petite maman Anglaise' (*Jane Eyre*, 210). Like the disguise of the gypsy fortune-teller he had donned earlier, French allows him to lift his inhibitions and to say more than he would normally allow himself to say. He hides behind the foreign language which takes on a performative value here, as Jane becomes Mrs Rochester and hence Adèle's adoptive English mother.
- 18 Rochester specifies that the French phrase 'pour se donner une contenance' belongs to Adèle's idiom. He is echoing the addendum 'as Adèle would say' which he had used after expressing his desire to impose his superiority over Jane in terms of age and experience: 'This is legitimate, et j'y tiens, as Adèle would say' (*Jane Eyre*, 114). The repeated use of the phrase makes it into a refrain suggesting that Adèle has forged a particular French of her own. When Mrs Fairfax introduces her, she makes the point by citing Adèle's terminology before translating it into English: 'Here she comes with her 'bonne,' as she calls her nurse' (*Jane Eyre*, 85). During their first conversation, Adèle ascertains that Jane is proficient in French which she even possessively appropriates as 'my language' (*Jane Eyre*, 85).
- 19 On close examination, Adèle's French proves to be unidiomatic and grammatically incorrect. This is evident in the concern she expresses that Jane's hands are shaking, cited earlier: 'vos doigts tremblent comme la feuille' (*Jane Eyre*, 133). Adèle's confusion of the singular (la feuille) and the plural forms (vos doigts) is awkward, and an inaccurate rendering of the French phrase 'Vous tremblez comme la feuille'. She is just as unidiomatic when she recalls house parties at her mother's:

'Chez maman,' said she, 'quand il y avait du monde, je le suivais partout, au salon et à leurs chambres; souvent je regardais les femmes de chambre coiffer et habiller les dames, et c'était si amusant: comme cela on apprend.' (*Jane Eyre*, 142)
- 20 Her agreement in number is faulty here as she associates 'le monde' with the singular pronoun 'le' before slipping to the plural possessive pronoun 'leurs chambres'. For reasons of logic, it would have been more idiomatic to make the collective noun 'le

monde' agree with a plural pronoun (quand il y avait du monde, je [les] suivais partout [...] à leurs chambres').

- 21 Adèle's English is as unstable as her French, meaning that her language is a kind of *entre-deux* or *franglais*. As Mrs Fairfax explains before Jane meets her pupil, she cannot understand Adèle's English: 'she mixes it so with French' (*Jane Eyre*, 86). Brontë has Adèle translate word for word from the French when she says 'Now, Mademoiselle, I will repeat you some poetry' (*Jane Eyre*, 87). Adèle continues in this mode of translation when she states 'Madame Frédéric and her husband: she took care of me, but she is nothing related to me' (*Jane Eyre*, 87-88). Adèle's compound language speaks to her development and acculturation in England. Her life story is paralleled by Jane's development from rebellious outspoken child to respectable, responsible governess, schoolteacher and wife. Rochester however traces another trajectory for her from fairyland to reality when he describes her as a changeling, fairy-born and human bred (*Jane Eyre*, 373).
- 22 Adèle's hybrid language could be used to express Jane's intermediate state: neither pure French nor unadulterated English, it is comparable to Mason's accent which is 'not precisely foreign, but still not altogether English' (*Jane Eyre*, 162). That in-between language is also spoken by the Ingrams' French governess Mme Joubert, whose authority was mocked by the children when she tried to punish them by calling them 'villains childs!' (*Jane Eyre*, 151). Jane uses an unstable brand of English when she first starts learning French and wonders if she will ever be able to translate 'currently a certain little French storybook which Madame Pierrot had that day shown me.' (*Jane Eyre*, 63). The adverb 'currently' has a Gallic ring to it here, and translates how Jane's language has been tainted by her first lessons in French.
- 23 The hybrid language spoken by Jane and Adèle characterizes the state of transition in which these two young women find themselves: they are plunged in their education, which builds the bridge between childhood and maturity. The hybridity is also relevant to Adèle's cross-cultural identity as a girl born in Paris but brought up in England. Jane's own transition spans the social and the gender divide, as she moves from her dependence on others to financial independence. Learning French marks the first stage in Jane's liberation, and its conjugation in the text translates how she finds a place for herself in society.

Le juste milieu or le beau idéal

- 24 The search for a home acts as an impelling force in Jane's life. She describes her deluded first impression that she has found a comfortable home in Thornfield using a French term: 'nothing was wanting to complete the beau idéal of domestic comfort.' (*Jane Eyre*, 81).
- 25 Significantly, the expression 'beau idéal' differs in meaning and usage in English and French. In English, 'ideal' is a substantive qualified as beautiful. In French the substantive is 'beau', accompanied by the adjective 'idéal'. What is more, the expression has been welded into a compound word in English (written sometimes with a hyphen), with attested usage in 1801, whereas in French it is used primarily to refer to a movement in the decorative arts, which strove to restore classicism in 18th century France interiors. That slight discrepancy in meaning and usage between the two languages marks Jane's own in-between state, and subtly conveys the sense that she might be mistaken in her

appreciation of Thornfield upon arrival there. The foreign phrase functions as a cover-up, describing the apparent domestic comfort which hides the horrific secrets of the attic.

- 26 The second occurrence of the phrase 'beau idéal' is also in the context of a comfortable home. In this instance, Jane also accompanies it with the neologism formed by changing the postposition of the verb 'to clean up' (meaning to tidy up) to read 'to clean down the house'. She also changes the postposition of the verb 'to rub down', activating these verbs to emphasize the thorough housekeeping job she intends (washing down, scrubbing down the floors). She thus invents a verb to refer to her activity as a woman preparing the house for Christmas, and enquires of St John if he has understood what she means:

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 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-idéal of a welcome when they come. (*Jane Eyre*, 332, my emphasis)

- 27 Jane therefore uses French to describe her image of the perfect home: it represents what she is seeking, in other words a welcoming place where she feels comfortable. The 'beau idéal' is reached through compromise and through a balance of passion and reason, hence the second expression in the title of this subsection: *le juste milieu*.

- 28 *Le juste milieu* means the happy medium or the golden mean, in other words the middle course between two conflicting forces. The phrase is intended as a pun here, as I am also using it to mean 'the right environment'. As I have said, Jane's search throughout the novel is for a warm, honest English home. Her *beau idéal* is opposed to Rochester's fanciful invitation to live on the moon, an offer which is checked by Adèle's pragmatism:

' . . . I am to take mademoiselle to the moon, and there I shall seek a cave in one of the white valleys among the volcano-tops, and mademoiselle shall live with me there, and only me.'

'She will have nothing to eat: you will starve her,' observed Adèle.

'I shall gather manna for her morning and night: the plains and hillsides in the moon are bleached with manna, Adèle.'

'She will want to warm herself: what will she do for a fire?'

'Fire rises out of the lunar mountains: when she is cold, I'll carry her up to a peak, and lay her down on the edge of a crater.'

'Oh, qu'elle y sera mal—peu confortable!' (*Jane Eyre*, 227)

- 29 Adèle shows her French colours in her preoccupations with food and comfort, which is compounded when she questions Rochester's claim that Jane is a fairy:

I told her not to mind his badinage; and she, on her part, evinced a fund of genuine French scepticism: denominating Mr. Rochester 'un vrai menteur,' and assuring him that she made no account whatever of his 'Contes de fée,' and that 'du reste, il n'y avait pas de fées, et quand même il y en avait,' she was sure they would never appear to him, nor ever give him rings, or offer to live with him in the moon. (*Jane Eyre*, 228)

- 30 In a whimsical, light-hearted vein allying practicality and pragmatism, Adèle dismisses the moon as the ideal environment for married life. On a more serious note, Jane later musters reason to vanquish passion when she resists the temptation to live unwedded to Rochester in his 'white-washed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean' in southern France (*Jane Eyre*, 259). She is ruled by reason and becomes mistress—not of Rochester—but in a village school. When she frames a rhetorical question about the conflict she faced between reason and passion, she uses a sibilant repetition in 's' to suggest the life of

sensuality offered by Rochester while at the same time condemning it for its licentiousness:

Which is better?—To have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort—no struggle;—but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on the flowers covering it; wakened in a southern clime, amongst the luxuries of a pleasure villa: to have been now living in France, Mr. Rochester's mistress; . . . or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (*Jane Eyre*, 306)

- 31 Jane has made a life for herself which is 'free and honest': she has settled in the 'right environment', which is neither in France nor on the moon, but in down-to-earth central England. It is healthy, and both nurtures and disciplines her. The French language brings independence to Jane, but—defying the cliché—she finds freedom not in France, but in England where her existence is also characterized by its honest, healthy way of life.
- 32 A conclusion of how the French language is grafted onto the English text of what Sandra Gilbert has termed this 'distinctively female *Bildungsroman*' (Gilbert and Gubar 339) invites us to consider its problematic conclusion. Not to engage in the debate over the apparent incongruity of St John's closing words, but to focus our attention on the home Jane has made for herself and the update we are given of Adèle's education. The conclusion assesses whether uprooting her from the immorality of Paris and embedding her in an English environment has given her a good education. Rochester introduces the image of transplanting when he reifies Adèle as a plant: 'I took the poor thing out of the slime and mud of Paris, and transplanted it here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden' (*Jane Eyre*, 124). Rochester's image considers Adèle's education in organic terms, so one could say that an English education of restraint and composure has been grafted onto Adèle's natural ways, and has checked their growth and development. The graft is first visible in the episode we have already cited in which Jane realizes that Adèle's French preoccupation with how she looks is quintessentially Victorian in its 'earnestness':

'Est-ce que je ne puis pas prendre une seule de ces fleurs magnifiques, mademoiselle ? Seulement pour compléter ma toilette.'

'You think too much of your "toilette", Adèle, but you may have a rose.' And I took a rose from a vase and fastened it in her sash. . . . I turned my face away to conceal a smile I could not suppress: there was something ludicrous as well as painful in the little Parisienne's earnest and innate devotion to matters of dress.' (*Jane Eyre*, 145)

- 33 Jane's ambivalent reaction here underscores the discrepancy between English and French values. The first boarding school Adèle is sent to after Jane's marriage continues to provide her with an English education, but she suffers from its severity. As a result, she looked 'pale and thin' (*Jane Eyre*, 383), an image that puts the finishing touches to the double portrait of Jane and Adèle which has been sketched throughout the novel. Indeed, it echoes and inverts in translation the terms in which Rochester asks Adèle to confirm the identity of her governess: '*Monsieur a parlé de vous : il m'a demandé le nom de ma gouvernante ; et si elle n'était pas une petite personne assez mince et un peu pâle*' (*Jane Eyre*, 101). In the concluding pages of the novel, Adèle is no longer given a voice and Jane is left to report on her education: "As she grew up, a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion: docile, good-tempered and well-principled" (*Jane Eyre*, 383). Adèle has been nurtured in an English environment and trained to constrain her Frenchness in order to behave according to Victorian propriety. The fact that Jane appreciates her

‘docile, good-tempered and well-principled’ behaviour is as eloquent about Adèle’s development as it is about Jane’s. Adèle has out-Janed Jane by blossoming as an English rose.

- 34 At the end of the novel, Jane has found—and founded—a home with Rochester as her husband. The knowledge of French which qualified ‘Mademoiselle Aire’ to be employed as governess to Adèle has given her access to freedom, and led to her happiness and marital bliss in a balanced partnership with Rochester. The opening up of a French linguistic space in the fabric of the text spells independence and a form of expression for Jane, but in the conclusion, that French ‘aire’ translates into an ‘eyrie’ where Jane ‘the skylark’ builds—and shares—a nest with the man she compares to the ‘royal eagle’ (*Jane Eyre*, 374).

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX

Les Petits Orphelins. Louis Belmontet, 1824

L’hiver glace les champs, les beaux jours sont passés :
 Malheur au pauvre sans demeure !
 Loin des secours il faut qu’il meure :
 Comme les champs alors tous les cœurs sont glacés.

De l'an renouvelé c'était la nuit première ;
Les mortels, revenant de la fête du jour,
Hâtaient leur joie et leur retour ;
Même un peu de bonheur visitait la chaumière.

Au seuil d'une chapelle assis,
Deux enfants, presque nus, et pâles de souffrance,
Appelaient des passants la sourde indifférence,
Soupirant de tristes récits.

Une lampe à leurs pieds éclairait leurs alarmes,
Et semblait supplier pour eux.
Le plus jeune, tremblant, chantait baigné de larmes,
L'autre tendait la main au refus des heureux.

« Nous voici deux enfants, nous n'avons plus de mère :
« Elle mourut hier en nous donnant son pain.
« Elle dort où dort notre père.
« Venez ; nous avons froid, nous expirons de faim.

« L'étranger nous a dit : - Allez : j'ai ma famille ;
« Est-ce vous que je dois nourrir ? -
« Nous avons vu pleurer sa fille,
Et pourtant nous allons mourir. »

Et sa voix touchante et plaintive
Frappait les airs de cris perdus :
La foule, sans les voir, s'échappait fugitive ;
Et bientôt on ne passa plus.

Ils frappaient à la porte sainte,
Car leur mère avait dit que Dieu n'oubliait pas.
Rien ne leur répondait que l'écho de l'enceinte,
Rien ne venait que le trépas.

La lampe n'était pas éteinte ;
L'heure d'un triste accent vint soupirer minuit.
Au loin d'un char de fête on entendit le bruit,
Mais on n'entendit plus de plainte.

Vers l'église portant ses pas,
Un prêtre, au jour naissant, allant à la prière,
Les voit, blanchis de neige et couchés sur la pierre,
Les appelle en pleurant... Ils ne se lèvent pas.

Leur pauvre enfance, hélas ! se tenait embrassée,
Pour conserver sans doute un reste de chaleur ;
Et le couple immobile, effrayant de pâleur,
Tendait encor sa main glacée.

Le plus grand, de son corps couvrant l'autre à moitié,
Avait porté sa main aux lèvres de son frère,
Comme pour arrêter l'inutile prière,
Comme pour l'avertir qu'il n'est plus de pitié.

Ils dorment pour toujours, et la lampe encor veille :
 On les plaint, on sait mieux plaindre que secourir.
 Vers eux de toutes parts les pleurs viennent s'offrir ;
 Mais on ne venait pas la veille.

The Orphans

Translated from the French of Louis Belmontet by Charlotte Brontë.⁶

'Twas New Year's night; the joyous throng
 Of guests from banquet rose,
 And lightly took their homeward path
 Across the drifted snows.
 That night, e'en to the peasants' shed,
 Some little gleam of gladness spread.

That night, beside a chapel door,
 Two lonely children stood;
 In timid tone, with utterance faint,
 They asked a little food:
 Careless, the laughing guests passed by,
 Too gay to mark the Orphans' cry.

A lamp that lit the sacred shrine
 The children's pale cheeks shewed;
 The elder stretched his trembling hand
 For what was not bestowed;
 The younger sang a plaintive strain,
 Oft dropped, then feebly raised again:—

'Two friendless, helpless children, we,
 Our mother's death we weep;
 Together, in one narrow grave,
 She and our father sleep!
 We too of cold and want must die,
 If none will help or hear our cry!'

This voice was lost; the winter-wind
 Bore off its tones subdued,
 And soon the merry feasters gone,
 Left all in solitude;
 And none had looked towards the church,
 Or marked the Orphans in its porch.

Then turned they to the chapel door;
 Their mother oft had said
 That God will shield the friendless poor,
 When other aid is fled.
 They knocked—an echo mocked the ear;
 They waited—Death alone drew near!

Time speeds; the lamp shines feebly still,
 The chimes of midnight sound;

Heard now from far, a chariot's wheels
 Ring o'er the frozen ground.
 Rise, Orphans! Call! No!—hushed their cry.
 Unchecked, the chariot thunders by.

A Priest his matins came to say,
 When dawn first lit the skies;
 He found them on the threshold laid;
 He called—they would not rise!
 The icy steps of stone, their bed,
 The white snow for their covering spread.

Clasped closely in each other's arms
 As if for warmth, they lay;
 But perished is the fire of Life,
 And stilled the pulses' play;
 Mute, motionless, and ashen pale,
 They slept, no more to wake or wail!

The elder pressed the younger's lips,
 As if to check a prayer;
 As if to say, "Tis vain to ask!
 Compassion dwells not here!"
 And half he screened his brother's form,
 To hide him from the frozen storm.

Lulled thus in everlasting sleep,
 The Orphan Babes are laid;
 Now those their piteous fate may weep
 Who would not give them aid:
 Crowds thronged the church by morning light,
 But none came near, that winter-night!

NOTES

1. See 'New Novels' in *Fraser's Magazine* (1849), volume XL, 693.
2. See EELLS 2003.
3. The term is used by Sue LONOFF in her article 'Charlotte Brontë's Belgian Essays: The Discourse of Empowerment', *Victorian Studies* XXXII : 3 (Spring 1989): 387-409.
4. The French text of the poem and Brontë's translation of it are reproduced in the appendix.
5. Patricia Yaeger even hears an echo between the French verb and Jane's family name. See YAEGER 37.
6. From BRONTË, *Poems*, 72-74.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines how Brontë makes French into a kind of licence for freedom of speech issued to both the eponymous heroine of the novel and the novelist herself. Jane's knowledge of French qualifies her for the post of governess to Parisian born Adèle, and thus offers her an income and some independence. Significantly, the first French verb Jane learns is *être*, as if the foreign language were offering her a new life. At Thornfield, she finds herself in a small community of French speaking women. Adèle's frivolity and clothes-consciousness typify French stereotypes which contrast with Jane's earnestness and self-government. Rochester calls on his command of French in an attempt to define his non-conventional relationship with Jane. Thanks to the French language, Brontë's heroine succeeds in constructing her own space in the Victorian domestic world.

Cet article examine la façon dont Brontë fait de la langue française une sorte de permis de la liberté d'expression aussi bien pour l'héroïne éponyme de son roman que pour elle-même en tant que romancière. Ce sont ses connaissances du français qui qualifient Jane pour le poste de gouvernante de la jeune Adèle, née à Paris, et qui lui procurent ainsi les moyens de subvenir à ses besoins. Il est sans doute significatif que le premier verbe français que Jane ait appris soit « être », comme si la langue étrangère lui offrait une nouvelle vie. À Thornfield, elle se retrouve en compagnie de femmes francophones. Adèle, frivole et coquette, incarne les stéréotypes français, qui tranchent avec le sérieux et la maîtrise de soi de Jane. Rochester lui-même fait appel à sa connaissance de la langue française pour tenter de mettre des mots sur sa relation avec Jane, qui contrevient aux codes victoriens. Grâce à la langue française, l'héroïne de Brontë réussit à construire un espace à soi dans le monde domestique victorien.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Brontë (Charlotte), communauté féminine francophone, discipline, Bildungsroman féminin, langue française, Jane Eyre, langue étrangère comme accès à la liberté, masques linguistiques, performance, traduction

Keywords: female Bildungsroman, French language, French-speaking community of women, foreign language as passport to freedom, linguistic masks, translation

AUTHOR

EMILY EELLS

Emily Eells is Professor of British literature at the University of Paris at Nanterre. She is a specialist of 19th century British art and literature, and author of *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (published by Ashgate in 2002). She is now working on Oscar Wilde's use of French, and questions related to the use of foreign languages in English texts more generally. She is head of the research group 'Confluences : les mots étrangers/The Words of Others' (CREA,

Université de Paris Ouest) and co-edited with Christine Berthin and Jean-Michel Déprats the first volume of articles produced by that group, entitled *L'Étranger dans la langue* (Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2013).

Emily Eells est professeur d'anglais à l'Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense et spécialiste de la littérature et de l'art britanniques du XIX^e siècle. Auteur de Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture (publié par Ashgate en 2002), elle travaille actuellement sur Oscar Wilde et la France, et s'intéresse tout particulièrement aux questions de 'l'interlinguistique', c'est-à-dire l'empreinte d'une langue étrangère dans un texte d'une autre langue. Elle dirige le groupe de recherches 'Confluences : les mots étrangers' (CREA, Université de Paris Ouest) et a co-édité avec Christine Berthin et Jean-Michel Déprats le premier recueil des travaux de ce groupe intitulé L'Étranger dans la langue (Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2013).