

A BRONTË PILGRIMAGE

On my last trip to England, some years ago, I spent a day at the Bronte Parsonage. I visited the house, which is a museum, and wandered on the unchanged moors, wool-gathering; also gathering bits of wool snagged in the heath, doubtless from descendants of Brontëan flocks. At the Parsonage, I learned that the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* is in the New British Library, in London. The previous week my sister and I had been there, in the India Office, doing research for our respective projects.

So I got on a train at Leeds and returned to London. Back at the Library, I asked to see the manuscript of *Jane Eyre*. A classically dour superintendent, who could have auditioned for the role of Mrs. Danvers, explained (with more severity than I thought strictly necessary) that only for Very Good Reason is *Jane Eyre* ever brought out; it is among the most priceless treasures; it is in the class of *The Bhagavad Gita* and *Finnegans Wake*.

I stood my ground. With an air of suspicion she finally handed me a request form. The questions were as prohibitive as an application for citizenship:

1. Why must you see the original?
2. Why won't a facsimile do?
3. What university are you associated with?
4. What have you published?

I sensed that an umbrella answer such as: "It's my favorite book" wouldn't suffice. So I wrote out the scanty truth, though not very hopefully.

1. I wish to see the original because Charlotte Bronte breathed upon the pages.
2. The facsimile is not the real thing.
3. I am not affiliated with a university.
4. I haven't published much, except for a four-part essay, "*Jane Eyre: A Subjective Appreciation*," in *The Brontë Society Newsletter*, which, though an American publication, is under the proprietary scrutiny of its parent organization in Haworth, Keighley, West Yorkshire, England.

A day or two after my petition, I was informed that I could see the manuscript. Still frowning, Mrs. Danvers said: "This title is in three volumes; Volume Two is in on display and not available for inspection; that being the case, would you prefer to look at Volume One or Volume Three?"

"Oh, Volume One, please," I said, and the opening sentence appeared instantly in my mind's eye: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day."

Coldly, Mrs. Danvers said: "Have a seat in one of the carrels and it will be brought out to you."

I sat down, dwarfed by the scale of the furniture and the heavy air of concentration in the room. The tables were burdened with mostly medieval books, and the elbows of furiously intent academics who all looked exactly *like* academics. Each brandished a magnifying glass, and buried (with almost prurient absorption) a scholarly nose in the deep vellum cleavage of an ancient ornamented tome.

'Ere long, a smallish bound manuscript was put in my hands, which I accepted with the awe of being offered a newborn to hold. It was small and plain,

like the eponymous governess herself. Opening the cover, I read the precise penmanship: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." Turning each page, I noted down the few changes (one of them, a substitution of "port" for "harbour," the latter neatly crossed out).

Two hundred fifty-five pages, a third of the entire, delicately scribed by quill with hardly any alteration. The scene where ten-year-old Jane is in a window seat, looking at Bewick's Arctic wood engravings, and looking out on a dismal November day: "At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast."

If I remember correctly, Charlotte wrote this immortal masterpiece in Manchester, where she'd taken her father for cataract surgery. Not a bad way to pass the time in a doctor's waiting room.

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