"I longed for a power of vision": Bodily Experience and Female Subjectivity in *Jane Eyre*

Nanami YAMAMOTO

In the Victorian era, the images of women were strictly shaped by male ideals and societal conventions. Much Victorian literature and critical commentary constructed the expectation that women's identities were predominantly defined in relation to male authority and domestic duties, and they were expected to be "innocent, pure, and self-sacrificing" (Gorham 4). Facing such patriarchal social norms, Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) tried to enhance women's autonomy. Throughout her first published novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), she destabilizes the stereotypical image of femininity by illuminating the capabilities of female passions. This intention is implicitly expressed in her critique of Jane Austen's work. It is a letter Brontë addressed to her acquaintance, William Smith Williams, an editor at Smith, Elder & Co., on 12 April 1850:

> . . . [T]he Passions are perfectly unknown to her [Austen]. . . . Her business is not half so much with the as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death—this Miss Austen ignores. . . . (Smith 383)

While giving credit to Austen's description of physicality, Brontë criticizes that Austen de-evaluates the capability of "the passions" and "the feelings" of "the human heart" which motivate the movements of the "eyes" to "see keenly," and "hands and feet" to move "flexibly," the agents which bring to the fore women's desires. For Brontë, that is, the description of the body is vital to reveal women's own "feelings" and "passions"

which have been repressed within the stereotypical image of the Victorian women. Most importantly, when Brontë writes about women, she focuses on showing their bodily sensations in a vivid way. Here, Brontë's idea of bodily sensation—where the body is closely connected with the movements of the heart and the inner feelings highlights the importance of physical experience.

Brontë challenges restrictive gender norms in this novel, a point that has been widely recognized by scholars. Alexander and Smith observe that Brontë "protest[s] against the social prescriptions that limited women's behavior and opportunities" (Alexander and Smith 187). Building on this point, many critics have examined the role of bodily sensation in the novel, especially the significance of the gaze. For instance, Rachel Teukolsky critiques how the male gaze in *Jane Eyre* functions as a mechanism of surveillance and oppression over female behavior. As a countermeasure, Brontë foregrounds the female gaze. In this paper, I argue that Jane Eyre uses vision not only to shape the possibilities for female subjectivity but also to expose its inherent limits. While visuality often allows women to articulate their inner selves, it also risks reducing them into fixed images. To address these tensions, Brontë turns to the sensing of touch as a way to explore new modes of perception that might enable the construction of female subjectivity.

1. The Male Gaze and the Female Self-Surveillance

In this novel, Jane complains about Victorian women's condition explicitly stating that "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel" (109). She also points out that it is narrow-minded and even thoughtless to ridicule or reprimand them for wanting to "do more or learn more than custom" (109). To overcome the gender-related barriers, Jane stresses the need to gain a new perspective:

> I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen—that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than

was here within my reach. (108–09; my emphasis)

In the original context, Jane longs for "a power of vision" that could surpass the limits imposed on her. These limits refer to the confinement of Victorian women within the domestic sphere, which prevents them from accessing the social and public world. By gaining "a power of vision," she could reach "towns" and "regions full of life [she] had never seen," acquire more practical experience than she had, engage with other people, and encounter "a variety of characters." Rather than simply criticizing her current situation, Jane illuminates "a power of vision," which enables her to transgress prescribed gender boundaries. In other words, this "power of vision" is essential to expand her own capability and understanding of the world.

Historically, in western philosophical thought, vision has long been considered the primary sense through which individuals apprehend and interpret the world. Martin Jay writes that "vision is man's most noble and dependable sense, and the struggle to understand it has occupied numbers of scholars for some two thousand years" (Jay 39). Jay also points out that Descartes emphasizes sight as the main source of knowledge and explained the idea of seeing in the mind as a valid way of thinking. In Descartes' theory, understanding through sight is not only about perceiving with the eyes but also involves reasoning to interpret and judge what is seen. This philosophical framework links vision and reason in a way that privileges those considered capable of rational thought.

From a gender perspective, this privileging of vision and reason has often been critiqued as male-centered. Women were traditionally thought to be less rational than men and thus were rarely emphasized as subjects who see and interpret the world. This philosophical bias contributed to a broader social pattern in which men act and women appear. John Berger argues that "[t]o be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. . . . Men act and women appear. Men look at women" (Berger 46–47). From his point of view, men observe, while women are always observed and objectified by the male gaze, reinforcing the social and cultural effects of vision as a means of power.

Building on this desire for a power of vision, Jane also internalizes the dominance of the male gaze. Ironically, even in the process of seeking "intercourse with her kind

and acquaintance with a variety of characters" (109), she judges herself and other women through a male-centred perspective. From her own childhood experience, she recognizes that her physical appearance is negatively evaluated by others, and therefore deeply understands the virtue of feminine beauty. For example, it is worth considering her emphasis upon the physical beauty of her cousin Georgianna: "Her beauty, her pink cheeks and gold curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault" (15). According to Elizabeth Gitter, Georgianna's "gold curls" embody "the image of female beauty" (Gitter 942). Jane herself admits that Georgianna's physical beauty can compensate for her "fault," and she is unconditionally loved by others. Thus, Jane is jealous of Georgianna, which can be seen behind Jane's critical observation of Georgianna.

Jane's understanding of the value of feminine beauty has roots deep in her childhood experience when she is compared with Georgianna by Bessie and Abbot, the servants in Gateshead Hall. Bessie and Abbot's evaluation is as follows:

> Bessie . . . sighed and said, 'Poor Miss Jane is to be pitied, too, Abbot!'
>
> 'Yes', responded Abbot, 'if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that'. 'Not a great deal, to be sure', agreed Bessie: 'at any rate, a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition'.
>
> 'Yes, I doat on Miss Georgiana!' cried the fervent Abbot. 'Little darling! — with her long curls and her blue eyes, and such a sweet color as she has; just as if she were painted!' (27: my emphasis)

Significantly, Bessie and Abbot evaluate two girls based on their physical characters. Abbot sarcastically calls Jane "a little toad" who deserves degrading treatment. On the other hand, Bessie and Abbot assume that Georgianna's beautiful figure cultivates their motivation to take care of her. That is, physical beauty is integral to the Victorian female. What is more significant is the fact that women themselves embrace the idealized notion of female beauty, which men like Rochester impose upon women. Therefore, Jane's physical appearance is negatively evaluated by not only men but also women themselves.

That is why Jane is well aware of the harshness of the female gaze, which contributes to the objectification of the female figure.

Even after becoming an adult, Jane is still trapped within the picturesque image of female beauty. In Thornfield, where she works for Rochester, for example, she sets her physical appearance as not up to standards of what is found around. Particularly, Jane compares herself with Blanche Ingram, described as the most beautiful woman in the social circumstances of Thornfield. The housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax explains about Ingram to Jane, before Ingram arrives at Thornfield:

> . . . she had such a fine head of hair; raven-black and so becomingly arranged: a crown of thick plaits behind, and in front the longest, the glossiest curls I ever saw. She was dressed in pure white; an amber-coloured scarf was passed over her shoulder and across her breast, tied at the side, and descending in long, fringed ends below her knee. (158)

Like Georgianna's "golden curls," Ingram's "fine head of hair" is highlighted here. Her glossy hair accentuates her feminine beauty. The hair on the back of her head is ornamented with "a crown of thick plaits." Anthony Synnott argues that plaits of hair signify "restricted sexuality" and the dress in "pure white" symbolizes feminine purity (Synnott 381). For Mrs. Fairfax, Victorian feminine beauty contains "pure" and "passionless" female characters. Thus, Mrs. Fairfax' description of Ingram's appearance is conditioned to meet the ideal of Victorian female beauty which Mrs. Fairfax tries to hold onto.

Based on such a description of Ingram given by Mrs. Fairfax, Jane draws her portrait before meeting her in person. In imagining her physical appearance, Jane illustrates what she considers to be feminine traits, and compares Ingram's portrait with her own portrait:

> Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully, without softening one defect . . . . Afterwards, take a piece of smooth ivory . . . delineate carefully the loveliest face you can imagine; paint it in your softest shades and sweetest lines,

> according to the description given by Mrs. Fairfax of Blanche Ingram . . . . Recall the august yet harmonious lineaments, the Grecian neck and bust; let the round and dazzling arm be visible, and the delicate hand; omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet; portray faithfully the attire, aërial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose; call it 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank.'Whenever, in future, you should chance to fancy Mr. Rochester thinks well of you, take out these two pictures and compare them. (159)

As if talking to herself, Jane recalls Mrs. Fairfax's description of Ingram while also enhancing it with her own imagination, adding details such as "the delicate hand," "the dazzling arm," and "the luxurious attire." Significantly, items like lace and satin were commonly associated with Victorian femininity, indicating Jane's awareness of societal ideals. Filtered through Rochester's eyes, Jane views Ingram's beauty in contrast with her own "poor and plain" appearance. Regarding this internalization of the male gaze, Berger notes that women become both "the surveyor and the surveyed within her" and are concerned with "how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men" (Berger 46). Jane scrutinizes Ingram's femininity while also surveying herself. By addressing herself as "you," Jane externalizes her image on the canvas and critiques her perceived lack of femininity, ultimately confronting the possibility that Rochester might prefer Ingram to her.

While longing for "the power of vision" (108–09), Jane struggles with the Victorian ideal of the female figure because she internalizes the male gaze. Brontë criticizes the way women suffer from trying to escape the constraints of the male-defined ideals of femininity. But Jane refuses to become like Ingram, the model of an ideal of Victorian woman. Instead, she seeks to gain the power to fulfill her own desires by looking at Rochester.

2. Challenging the Commodification of Female Figures

Jane's gaze evokes the possibility to overcome the stereotypical female figure which is regarded as a passionless angel in the domestic space. This is because she not only

escapes the stereotype of the female figure constructed by the male gaze, but also looks back at men to emphasize her own passions. When Jane first meets Rochester, Jane carefully observes his physical appearance. Although he is "enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared and steel clasped," she "trace[s] the general points of middle height and considerable breadth of chest" (113). Here, Jane focuses on his "considerable breadth of chest," as if she scrutinized his body line voyeuristically. Throughout her gaze upon his body, her sexual desire is represented constantly: "[M]y eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face . . . . I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking" (172). Rather than being identified as a sexual object for the male gaze, Jane sexually objectifies Rochester's body and obtains her "acute pleasure."

Moreover, Brontë emphasizes the physical contact between Jane and Rochester as the vehicle to intensify her sexual desire. For example, after Jane helps Rochester from the fire Bertha sets on, he holds her hands and stimulates her sexual desire:

> . . . you have saved my life! —snatched me from a horrible and excruciating death! and you walk past me as if we were mutual strangers! At least shake hands." He held out his hand; I gave him mine: he took it first in one, then in both his own. . . . Till morning dawned I was tossed on a buoyant but unquiet sea, where billows of trouble rolled under surges of joy. I thought sometimes I saw beyond its wild waters a shore, sweet as the hills of Beulah; and now and then a freshening gale, wakened by hope, bore my spirit triumphantly towards the bourne: but I could not reach it, even in fancy—a counteracting breeze blew off land, and continually drove me back. Sense would resist delirium: judgment would warn passion. Too feverish to rest, I rose as soon as day dawned. (150-51; my emphasis)

Here, Jane symbolically floats in "a buoyant but unquiet sea." Sigmund Freud argues that the image of water represents "wish-fulfillment especially sexual deviance" (402). Indeed, Brontë's description of the "sea" is symbolically associated with sexual pleasure Jane obtains from her physical contact with Rochester. Compared with "an acute pleasure [she finds] in looking," which is discussed earlier, the pleasure she symbolically achieves

here is described much more sensationally. On the other hand, her hesitance to liberate sexual desire is implicitly represented: "[s]ense would resist delirium: judgment would warn passion." Nevertheless, her "feverish" body signifies resistance to the repression of sexual desire. It means that the bodily experience reveals the difficulty for her to be confined within the stereotypical figure of Victorian woman.

In addition, Jane critically observes the ways in which Rochester imposes the idea of feminine beauty upon women. When they talk about Adele who stays at his house called Thornfield, he insinuates the fact that she was born outside of marriage between Rochester and "a French opera dancer, Celine Varens" (140). He makes an excuse for his sexual relationship with her as follows:

> And, Miss Eyre, so much was I flattered by this preference of the Gallic sylph for her British gnome, that I installed her in a hotel; gave her a complete establishment of servants, a carriage, cashmeres, diamonds, dentelles, &c. . . . it was a warm night, and I was tired with strolling through Paris, so I sat down in her boudoir; happy to breathe the air consecrated so lately by her presence. . . . I never thought there was any consecrating virtue about her . . . . (140)

Although Celine is identified as "a French opera dancer," Rochester illustrates her beauty as "her British gnome." Furthermore, he physically confines her in "a hotel," and decorates her with "carriage, cashmeres, diamonds, dentelles." It means that Rochester regards her as a commodity he possesses. For Jane, this exemplifies "his faults" that result in the manner in which he is "proud, sardonic, harsh to inferiority of every description" (144). In other words, she criticizes his attitude towards Celine, as it reveals his discrimination against women.

Furthermore, Jane expresses her disgust strongly when Rochester tries to impose the stereotypical idea of female beauty upon her own body. After she gets engaged to Rochester, for instance, he decorates her body with jewelry, as if he embellished a doll:

> "This little sunny-faced girl with the dimpled cheek and rosy lips; the satin-smooth hazel hair, and the radiant hazel eyes?" (I [Jane] had green eyes,

reader; but you must excuse the mistake: for him [Rochester] they were new-dyed, I suppose.)

"I [Rochester] will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead, . . . and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings. . . . You are a beauty in my eyes, and a beauty just after the desire of my heart . . . ."

"No, no, sir! think of other subjects, and speak of other things, and in another strain. Don't address me as if I[Jane] were a beauty; I am your plain . . . You are dreaming, sir . . . . (255–56; my emphasis)

Jane here complains that Rochester describes her eyes as "the radiant hazel eyes," because he literally transfigures her physical character and misleads the reader. In addition, she accuses him of his intention to adorn her with "the diamond chain," "the circlet," and "the bracelets" in a similar way in which he transfigures Celine's body into a desirable commodity for his self-satisfaction. Thus, what Jane problematizes is Rochester's "dreaming" in the idealized vision of feminine beauty and his self-centred intention to project the vision upon women's bodies without considering their own characteristics.

Jane's gaze toward Rochester not only reflects a critical perspective that challenges the objectifying male gaze, but also reveals that she expresses female desire through her own acts of looking. This indicates that *Jane Eyre* articulates a visuality that disrupts the traditional image of women as passive objects. While Jane's use of the "seeing" subject allows her to convey desire for Rochester, it does not fully establish her own agency or create a mutually constituted world with him.

3. Jane's Autonomy through the Bodily Experience

Brontë seems aware of both the potential and the limits of such a gaze, as I discussed in the previous section. It may account for her emphasis on other forms of human perception in this novel. Importantly, the ending of the novel is imbued with the complex process of sexual awakening. Jane's anxiety about the gaze of others is overcome incidentally and forcibly. In the thirty-seventh chapter, Jane finds that

Rochester lives no longer in Thornfield because it is destroyed by Bertha's arson. Due to this incident, Rochester partially loses his eyesight and one of his arms becomes impaired. He moves to Ferndean which is "a building of considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions" (425). In contrast to Thornfield, the area is almost plain and wild. It becomes the place of reunion between Rochester and Jane without intervention of any other people, which allows her to become active. According to John Maynard, such uncivilized atmosphere of Ferndean itself symbolizes the space of sexual fulfillment:

> [Ferndean] is dank and wet, surrounded by a thick. Gloomy wood. Yet it is also by its very wetness a place of achieved fertility . . . . The wood around is rich and thick, a massed version of the masculine vitality associated with trees . . . (141)

If, as Maynard claims, Ferndean is a symbol of sexually fulfilling space between themselves, Jane becomes the source of the power of sexual unison in this space. Since Rochester is unable to move freely and see well, Jane offers her care to disabled Rochester. Ichikawa Chieko argues about the contradictory concept of "care" which strengthens femininity on one hand, while it plays a significant role in overcoming gender barriers in social and cultural discourse on the other hand (41). Thus, caring Rochester allows Jane to take advantage of the stereotypical Victorian woman's image, while altering her attitude from passionless to passionate in the sexual space called Ferndean. Indeed, as a caregiver, Jane is able to touch Rochester in her own right: "I arrested his wondering hand, and prisoned it in both mine. . . . I am not cold like a corpse, nor vacant like air, am I?" (429-30). This reminds the reader of the scene when Rochester holds Jane's hands after she rescues him from Bertha's arson in Thornfield. As argued in the second section, when Rochester holds her hands, her body becomes "feverish" with her "passion" (151), and yet she also faces the difficulty to liberate her own sexual desire. On the other hand, in Ferndean, Jane becomes active enough to facilitate the opportunity to liberate her repressed desire and to destabilize the power relationship between them:

> "It is time someone undertook to rehumanize you," said I [Jane]. . . . My spirits were excited, and with pleasure and ease . . . . there was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity. . . . (432)

Jane's statement to "rehumanize" Rochester can be interpreted as teaching him a new way of being human, one that does not rely on sight to judge or value others. At the same time, this process allows Jane to express her own agency in ways other than sight, showing her feelings and desires, and freeing herself from the traditional limits imposed on women. In this sense, the act of "rehumanizing" is mutual, benefiting both Rochester and Jane.

Furthermore, Jane emphasizes their physical intimacy by employing Biblical terms. In the last chapter, Jane tells the reader about happiness she achieves in her life with Rochester: "[n]o woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh" (447). The phrase "bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh" directly alludes to the Bible, and gives the impression of Jane's sincere obedience to her husband. However, given her audacious attitude toward him in Ferndean, it is difficult to interpret that she is willingly offering her autonomy and supporting the idea that she is no longer herself. Rather, the statement is more likely to be associated with Jane's renewed awareness of her own body through the sense of touch. By foregrounding tactile perception, Brontë depicts emergence of female subjectivity.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty later theorizes the relation between touch and self-recognition, flesh is an "ultimate notion . . . not the union or compound of two substances but thinkable in itself" (Merleau-Ponty 141). He argues:

> When one of my hands touches the other, the world of each open upon that of the other because the operation is reversible at will, because they both belong . . . to one sole space of consciousness, because one sole man touches one sole thing through both hands. (Merleau-Ponty 141)

According to Merleau-Ponty, touch allows us to feel our body as part of the world and at the same time to be aware of our own existence. When Jane feels Rochester's body, she

does not simply perceive her body as part of the world, and she also comes to recognize her own body in relation to world. Consequently, when Jane states that she is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (447), it shows that by touching him and becoming physically close to him, her body gains autonomy. She can experience the world actively.

Significantly, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, Jane apprehends a profile of her own body and comes to grasp her embodied self through the tactile encounters she shares with Rochester. Jane explains her marriage life with Rochester as follow:

> I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. . . . I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. . . . Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done. (447)

In this passage, Jane's explanation exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's argument of embodied perception and the intertwining of self and world through touching. As she becomes Rochester's "eyes" and continues to serve as "his right hand," her body mediates his engagement with the world, transforming acts of "reading" to him and "conducting him where he wished to go." Their relationship illustrates the reciprocal constitution of female subjectivity: Jane's attentive touch both opens the world to Rochester and reinforces her own autonomy. Rather than a passive, vision-centred subjectivity, Jane embodies an active, perceptually and affectively engaged herself.

This paper analyzes the female subjectivity in *Jane Eyre* through the experiences of gaze, the body, and touch. While Jane longs for "the power of vision" (108-09), she has suffered from the evaluation of her appearance by others based on the Victorian ideals of femininity. In her relationship with Rochester, touching his body, she subverts the traditionally male-centred structure of the gaze and establishes a bodily subjectivity that encompasses her own sexuality and desire. Brontë critically depicts how women's bodies are objectified through the male gaze. Simultaneously, she explores how women can

engage with the world as active, autonomous subjects through bodily experience.

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