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THE VOICING OF
FEMININE DESIRE IN
ANNE BRONTË'S *THE TENANT
OF WILDFELL HALL*



Because of its radical and indecorous subject matter—a woman's flight from her abusive husband—Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shocked contemporary audiences. Yet the very indecorousness of the subject may seem to be undermined by the propriety of the form this narrative takes: the woman's story is enclosed within and authorized by a respectable man's narrative. Within the discourse of traditional analysis we would speak of the "nested" narratives of Anne Brontë's novel, one story enclosed within another. In this case, the woman's story, in the form of a diary, is "nested" within the man's narrative. The critical language we are employing here already suggests certain conclusions about priority and hierarchy. The woman's story must, it seems, be subsumed within the man's account, which is prior and originary. The presentation of her version of events depends upon his re-presentation. Within a traditional narrative analysis, then, Brontë's *Tenant* may tell an untraditional tale of a fallen woman redeemed, but it tells it in such a way that reaffirms the patriarchal status quo of masculine priority and privilege, of women's subordination and dependency. The radical subject is defused by the form. But such a traditional analysis that speaks of nested narratives is already contaminated by the patriarchal ideology of prior and latter and so cannot effectively question what I wish to question here: the transgressive nature of narrative exchange.

Following Roland Barthes I propose that we recognize “[a]t the origin of Narrative, desire,” because at the heart of narrative operates an economic system, an exchange. To Barthes, “[t]his is the question raised, perhaps, by every narrative. *What should the narrative be exchanged for? What is the narrative ‘worth’?*” In his analysis of “Sarrasine,” the exchange is a “night of love for a good story.” Thus “the two parts of the text are not detached from one another according to the so-called principle of ‘nested narratives.’ . . . Narrative is determined not by a desire to narrate but by a desire to exchange: it is a *medium of exchange*, an agent, a currency, a gold standard.”¹

I wish to examine Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in the light of narrative as exchange—of narrative within a narrative not as hierarchical or detachable parts but as interacting functions within a transgressive economy that allows for the paradoxical voicing of feminine desire. Articulating this process will be the focus of my essay. I also suggest here (to indicate implications of this analysis) that such narrative exchanges are common in Victorian stories of transgression, as in Barthes’s example, Balzac’s “Sarrasine” (the castrati as man/woman); in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (the self as Other—“I am Heathcliff”); in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (the human as monster); and in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (the civilized man as savage).

The ideas of feminine voice and feminine desire in Victorian England were oxymorons, in Roland Barthes’s coinage, *paradoxisms*, a joining of two antithetical terms, a “passage through the wall of the Antithesis.”² The patriarchal discourse of Victorianism coded terms such as masculine/feminine, desire/repletion, speech/silence as opposites, as paradigmatic poles marked by the slash. Thus the feminine view, which was repressed, could have no voice, and passion, or desire, was the province of the masculine, a function of what Barthes calls the symbolic code.

Barthes elaborates, “The antithesis is a wall without a doorway. Leaping this wall is a transgression. . . . Anything that draws these two antipathetic sides together is rightly scandalous (the most blatant scandal: that of form).”³ Barthes’s formulation suggests the immense difficulty confronting the Victorian writer who wished to give voice to feminine desire. This transgressive act at its most blatantly scandalous depends on formal juxtaposition: something that “draws these two antipathetic sides together.” I propose that we examine the transgressive possibilities inherent in the symbolic code itself and, further, that we look at the narrative within the narrative as a mode of juxtaposition, both of meanings and of focus.

In Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* the subject is transgression—a woman’s illegal flight from her husband.⁴ Brontë uses the transgressive possibilities of narrative exchange to *write* her transgressive story, a story of female desire, and she uses the transgressive possibilities of the symbolic code to

rewrite her transgression or “fall” as her triumph. A brief summary of the novel’s plot will focus the central issues. A young and idealistic woman marries a man whose character is already in need of reformation. Believing herself called to this task, she begins optimistically only to discover that she is powerless to effect any changes that cannot be wrought by the force of moral suasion. She has no social or legal leverage. Ultimately, finding her son and herself sinking into the corruption generated by her husband, she plans to flee, only to be defeated on a first attempt when her husband, discerning her intention, confiscates all her property. Prompted by her husband’s introduction of his mistress into the house as his son’s governess, she succeeds at a second attempt, but she must carefully guard her identity from her inquisitive neighbors or she may be betrayed to her husband and forced to return.

These events, at the heart of the novel, are told only retrospectively. The novel is, in fact, doubly retrospective—Helen’s narrative is nested within Gilbert’s narrative, which is, in turn, a story told to his friend Halford. The novel opens in 1847 when Gilbert commences his correspondence with Halford. He has felt that he owes Halford a return for an earlier confidence and will now make good his “debt” with an “old-world story . . . a full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life.”⁵ Gilbert’s narrative itself begins twenty years earlier, in the autumn of 1827, with the arrival of a new tenant at Wildfell Hall. Helen Graham, the mysterious tenant, is that woman who has transgressed Victorian social convention by leaving her husband, and her story—incorporated through her diary—begins on 1 June 1821. Brontë anticipates Barthes by having Gilbert define narrative exchange as economic exchange. He writes to Halford: “If the coin suits you, tell me so, and I’ll send you the rest at my leisure: if you would rather remain my creditor than stuff your purse with such ungainly heavy pieces . . . I’ll . . . willingly keep the treasure to myself” (44). The monetary metaphors underline the novel’s implicit insistence that one does not narrate simply because of a desire to narrate: narration enacts an exchange and a gain or loss.

Traditional literary criticism has faulted Brontë’s *Tenant* for its clumsy device of Helen Graham’s interpolated diary. George Moore, otherwise ardently enthusiastic over Brontë’s talents, instigated criticism of her artistic “breakdown” in the middle of the novel. Moore regretted not the interpolated tale but the manner of exchange. He complained, “You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer . . . your heroine must tell the young farmer her story” to “preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story.”⁶ This distinction in the mode of exchange, telling versus writing, raises a question Barthes does not discuss, and it encourages further reflection. Were the heroine merely to speak her tale, then one kind of economic exchange would be confirmed: her story for his chivalric allegiance,

something he is struggling to preserve in the face of society's calumny. Such a "telling" would preserve the atmosphere of "a passionate and original love story," as George Moore saw, but that story would be the traditional one of a male subject's reaffirmation of his desire for a woman as object. That is not the story Brontë wanted to write. Helen's diary spans one-half of the novel, and it confirms another kind of economic exchange: her story for the right to fulfill her polymorphous desire—to restore her reputation, to punish with impunity her husband, and to marry a man who consents to be the object of her beneficence and affection.

Gilbert Markham opens his narrative with the arrival of Helen Graham at Wildfell Hall. She is immediately put into circulation as an object of community gossip, speculation, and horror that a "single lady" has let a "place . . . in ruins" (37). The community reads her character through this behavior, concluding she must be a "witch," a decoding that follows from an initial suspicion that she cannot be a "respectable female" (38, 39). Such suspicions unleash a barrage of one-way exchanges in the form of "pastoral advice" or "useful advice" (38, 39) as community members seek to circumscribe her within the usual sexual economies, to regulate "the apparent, or non-apparent circumstances, and probable, or improbable history of the mysterious lady" (39). The explicit oppositions in this passage emphasize the binaries that undergird Brontë's story from the outset, the excesses of which disrupt the seemingly simple love story of a young farmer and beautiful stranger. As we have seen in Barthes's formulation, this is a function of antitheses or the symbolic code, which both separates and joins and thus allows for the transgression as well as the conservation of oppositions.

Is Helen Graham a witch-devil or an angel? Is she a wife or a widow, amiable or ill-tempered? Is she pure or corrupt, a saint or a sinner, faithful or fallen? Her identity is made more problematic because her decorous appearance and religious devotion coexist with her claims that she has no use for "such things that every lady ought to be familiar with" and "what every respectable female ought to know" (39). Although civilized in manner, she appears to "wholly disregard the common observances of civilized life" (51).

It is immediately plain that Brontë is not giving us the traditional generic domestic comedy, that is, the story of a woman who focuses on making herself into a desirable object for a suitable man. That story is circumvented at the outset with Helen Graham's ambiguous status as widow/wife, and yet the pressure of that traditional narrative is such, and the cultural expectations for beautiful women are such, that Gilbert's story strives to become that narrative as he falls out of love with Eliza Millward and into love with Helen Graham and begins to write himself into the narrative as the rescuing figure of the maligned and misunderstood lady. Significantly, Gilbert's narrative at first tends to assign similar traits to Eliza and Helen despite their manifest differences. For exam-

ple, Gilbert describes Eliza Millward as a woman whose "chief attraction" (like Helen's) lay in her eyes: "the expression various, and ever changing but always either preternaturally—I had almost said *diabolically*—wicked, or irresistibly bewitching—often both" (42). This assignment of traits aligns Eliza paradigmatically with Helen (she is already syntagmatically aligned since she is another love interest of Gilbert), and the effect is to domesticate Helen and her true strangeness because we rapidly perceive that Eliza is a very ordinary young woman who does desire only to become the object of some man's affection. Thus, at this early point, Gilbert's narrative strives to interpret Helen Graham as it does Eliza Millward—as just another woman whose life could be fulfilled by connection with his.

By initially making Helen Graham an object of Gilbert's narrative and not the subject of her own, the text enacts what it also presents thematically: women's objectification and marginalization within patriarchal culture. Specific comments underscore our perception of this process. Helen Graham is criticized for making a "milk-sop," not a "man," of her little boy, who is supposed to "learn to be ashamed" of being "always tied to his mother's apron string" (52). Helen's energetic defense insists, "I trust my son will never be ashamed to love his mother," and "I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother's authority and affection!" (55).

Women are paradigmatically all linked and consequently all marginalized by obsessive attention to men and their needs. Gilbert's sister complains, "I'm told I ought not to think of myself." She quotes her mother's words: "You know, Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what's proper to be done, and secondly, what's most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—anything will do for the ladies'" (78). Mrs. Markham sums up the duties of husband and wife: "you must fall each into your proper place. You'll do your business, and she, if she's worthy of you, will do hers; but it's your business to please yourself, and hers to please you" (79).

Gilbert Markham is suddenly and surprisingly enabled to articulate this process and his own benefits: "Perhaps, too, I was a little spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance" (5). He achieves this unusual self-knowledge partly to prepare for his ceding the position of subject to Helen and thereby crediting her story and the possibility of her desire. He tells his mother, "[W]hen I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive" (79).

We are also prepared for the narrative's change of focus by the extent of Helen Graham's difference from the women around her. A professional painter who supports herself and her son, she "cannot afford to paint for [her] own amusement" (69). She does not allow her painting to be interrupted by casual social calls, objects to Gilbert's "superintendence" of her

progress on a sketch and to being the object of his appreciative gaze, and manifests an "evident desire to be rid of [Gilbert]" (89). A visit he pays her provokes his recognition, "I do not think Mrs. Graham was particularly delighted to see us," an indirect confession of his initial failure to accord primacy to her as desiring subject instead of desired object.

These thematic shifts anticipate and prepare for the narrative exchange that is about to take place as Gilbert cedes the story to Helen. In fact, such shifts proliferate just prior to the commencement of Helen's diary narrative. Gilbert begins to change his orientation toward Helen, focusing less on how she meets his desire and more on how he might meet hers. He confesses that his early behavior toward her made him "the more dissatisfied with myself for having so unfavourably impressed her, and the more desirous to vindicate my character and disposition in her eyes, and if possible, to win her esteem" (85).

Yet at the same time that Gilbert expresses dissatisfaction with his early behavior, he embroils himself in an embarrassing misunderstanding with Mr. Lawrence, whom he imagines to be another would-be lover of Helen because he is blind to the truth that Lawrence is, in fact, her brother. Markham here enacts a charade of the jealous lover—a charade marked by insults and, finally, by a physical assault on Lawrence. It is his nadir, the moment when he privileges the community voices and the "evidence of [his] senses" (145) over Helen's authority to speak her story. Although Gilbert Markham pretends to disregard the storm of rumor surrounding Helen Graham that the community circulates—characterized as "shaky reports," "idle slander," "mysterious reports," "talk," "the poison of detracting tongues," a "spicy piece of scandal," "the calumnies of malicious tongues," "vile constructions," "lying inventions," "babbling fiends" (96, 97, 102, 103, 120, 123, 124)—his behavior reveals that he accords rumor great authority. When he adds what he calls "the evidence of my senses," he feels his position is unassailable just at the point where it is most vulnerable. We, as readers, appreciate the limitation of Gilbert's perspective, the ways he, in focalizing events and other characters, has generated a cloud of misapprehension shaped by his own needs, fears, and desires. At this point his narrative is bankrupt, unable to provide answers to the questions generated by the text's hermeneutic code. Helen's voice intervenes at this point, with greater narrative authority, to silence the other proliferating voices. Her narrative must redeem Gilbert's and provide those answers, the final signifieds of the text's multiplying signifiers: the promise that the classic novel holds out.

I mentioned earlier that narratives of transgression often depend on narrative exchange. Whether we are dealing with the young lady in "Sarrasine," or Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, or Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein*, or the unnamed fellow in *Heart of Darkness*, or Gilbert in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the focalizer of events confronts an enigma born of a transgression of

antitheses, and his explanatory power is momentarily exhausted. Answers to the enigma depend on a new viewpoint, a new focus—in this case, a new narrator or focalizer. I use the term "focalizer" deliberately to allow us to distinguish between the one who narrates and the one who sees or focuses the events.⁷ But the relationship between the two focalizers is always problematic because they offer competing narratives; each claims authority to tell the story, and the two versions cannot be simply supplementary. The relationship between the two focalizers may also become problematic because one of the narrators may become the focalizer of both narratives, which is what I believe happens in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and this collapse generates a narrative transgression—a confusion of outside and inside, primary and secondary, subject and object. Although Helen's story is enclosed within Gilbert's story and might seem, therefore, to be part of his, nonetheless, by providing the answers we and Gilbert seek, it subordinates his narrative to hers. Helen's narrative rewrites Gilbert's, stabilizing it within a particular hermeneutic pattern. Thus, it is her story but also his story, a conflation that Brontë plays upon after Helen's diary concludes and Markham resumes; it becomes impossible at times to distinguish which one is the focalizer of events, a process to be examined after we explore the operation of the symbolic code in Helen's story.

Helen's narrative fully focalizes the "paradoxism" of feminine desire. Her diary, first of all, records the story of a young woman's falling in love and concomitant distraction and alienation from her common pursuits and ordered life. That is, hers is an often told tale of a young woman's newly aroused desire for a young man: "All my former occupations seem so tedious and dull. . . . I cannot enjoy my music. . . . I cannot enjoy my walks. . . . I cannot enjoy my books. . . . My drawing suits me best. . . . But then, there is one face I am always trying to paint or to sketch" (148). Helen's painting becomes an eloquent voice of her desire for Huntingdon because it reveals to him what her words deny. Indeed, Huntingdon pinpoints the connection between images and words, between hasty tracings and postscripts: "I perceive, the backs of young ladies' drawings, like the post-scripts of their letters, are the most important and interesting part of the concern" (172). And, as he reads the message of her desire in her sketch, Helen is mortified: "So then! . . . he despises me, because he knows I love him" (172). This recognition underscores a significant pattern already in place, that a young woman must disguise her physical desire for a man because expression of such desire only kindles contempt within a patriarchy.

Thus, Helen's perception initiates a process, first of dissembling her desire and then, more significantly, of coding a physical urge as a spiritual need. In the first move, the desire becomes a subterranean force, something not openly expressed; in the second move, the desire is no longer recognized or accepted

for what it is. A woman sublimates her physical desire for a man; it becomes a need to reform him spiritually. So, women's physical desires, because illicit, are often encoded in literature as spiritual ones. The legion of female saviors in Victorian fiction testifies to this rewriting. Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre is to guide and protect a reformed Rochester; George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth are to give a social focus to the self-indulgent desires of Will Ladislaw and Fred Vincy. Anne Brontë allows her heroine to be more vocal and articulate about her sublimated desire. In justifying her marriage to Huntingdon, Helen argues, "I will save him from" his evil companions, "I would willingly risk my happiness for the chance of securing his," and, finally, "If he has done amiss, I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors" (167). She sighs, "Oh! if I could but believe that Heaven has designed me for this!" (168). Helen is so indoctrinated by this myth that, when she believes Huntingdon has committed adultery with Annabella Wilmot, she claims, "It is not my loss, nor her triumph that I deplore so greatly as the wreck of my fond hopes for his advantage" (178). The failure of this rosy scenario is anticipated in her aunt's summation: "Do you imagine your merry, thoughtless profligate would allow himself to be guided by a young girl like you?" (165). That, of course, is precisely the Victorian myth and ideology. While Helen quietly gloats, "[A]n inward instinct . . . assures me I am right. There *is* essential goodness in him;—and what delight to unfold it!" (168), we are already apprised of her mistaken apprehension by the retrospective structure of the narrative that testifies to the fiction she is projecting.

What does it mean, then, that Brontë's Helen fails in her efforts at spiritual reform? And not only does she fail, but Huntingdon also succeeds to an extent in corrupting her. Such failure and reversal inevitably shift attention from the spiritual realm back to the physical one, in the traditional antithesis of body and soul. Not surprisingly, reviewers of *Tenant* were outraged because the novel concentrated so heavily on sensual indulgences and abuses. Perhaps more threatening, however, *Tenant* explodes the myth of woman's redemptive spirituality and insight, and it opens the door to the unthinkable transgression, feminine desire. The force of Helen's love is now channeled into hatred; a desire to redeem becomes a desire to punish. Helen admits, "I hate him tenfold more than ever, for having brought me to this! . . . Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel that they are turning my nature into gall" (323).

Again, Barthes's symbolic code helps to articulate the process. The symbolic code represents meaning as difference through antithesis that appears inevitable. And, as we have seen, "every joining of two antithetical terms . . . every passage through the wall of Antithesis . . . constitutes a transgression."⁸ Brontë insistently deploys such oppositions as love/hate, redemption/

punishment, saint/sinner, angel/devil, female/male to set up the conditions for transgression. At this point the text works to privilege and to legitimate one binary term over another. But, inevitably, due to the operation of the symbolic code, the text also becomes the site for exposure, multivalence, and reversibility. The pivotal event is Helen's return to nurse her injured husband. Does she return to redeem or to punish? Does she go out of love or out of hatred? Is she a ministering angel or a vengeful devil? Is she a holy saint or a common sinner?

In returning to Huntingdon, Helen passes through the wall of antithesis to transgress and to collapse differences that were seemingly inviolable. Huntingdon ejaculates at her return, "Devil take her," even as Markham extols the man's good fortune to have "such an angel by his side" (428, 444). Huntingdon perceives his returned wife as a "fancy" or "mania" that would "kill" him. Helen insists his mania is the "truth." She asserts she has come "to take care" of him, to "save" him. He answers, "[D]on't torment me now!" He interprets her behavior as "an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me." She states she has come to offer him "comfort and assistance," while he accuses her of a desire to overwhelm him "with remorse and confusion" (430). Huntingdon recognizes her act as "sweet revenge," made sweeter because "it's all in the way of duty" (433). He complains that she wants to "scare [him] to death"; she responds that she does not want to "lull [him] to false security" (434). Helen characterizes herself as his "kind nurse," while Huntingdon regrets that he has been abandoned to the "mercy of a harsh, exacting, cold-hearted woman" (439, 445). He is the object of her "solicitude"; she is no longer the object of his cruelty. Save/kill, care for/torment, angel/devil, truth/fancy, duty/revenge, kind/harsh, lull/scare, heaven/hell, higher seat/deeper pit—the signifiers slide, distinctions collapse, meaning erodes. Feminine desire expresses itself in the resulting vacuum of meaning. In the novel's hermeneutic, the fallen woman of Victorian life becomes the paragon, the exemplum, and revenge becomes a fine duty.

At the point that Helen returns to Huntingdon's bedside, Gilbert Markham has resumed the narration, but he has not assumed the authority to focus the bedside events. His narrative contains frequent letters from Helen, and she is as often the focalizer of the events as he is; indeed, it is often impossible to distinguish who is the focalizer. Gilbert's perspectives merge with Helen's as he incorporates her letters into his narrative—sometimes the literal words, sometimes a paraphrase—until the reader cannot distinguish between them. One narrative transgresses the other, distinctions between narrators collapse. For example, in chapter 49 Gilbert Markham writes, "The next [letter] was still more distressing in the tenor of its contents. The sufferer was fast approaching dissolution" (449). Theoretically, he is summarizing. But suddenly, we are in

the midst of a scene between Helen and Huntingdon in which present tense mixes with past to convey immediacy: "‘If I try,’ said his afflicted wife, ‘to divert him from these things . . . , it is no better’.—‘Worse and worse!’ he groans. . . . ‘And yet he clings to me with unrelenting pertinacity’" (450). We are then immediately immersed in dialogue.

"Stay with me, Helen. . . . But death *will* come. . . . Oh, if I *could* believe there was nothing after!"

"Don't try to believe it. . . . If you *sincerely* repent—"

"I *can't* repent; I only fear."

"You only regret the past for its consequences to yourself?"

"Just so—except that I'm sorry to have wronged you, Nell, because you're so good to me." (450)

The "afflicted wife" of Gilbert's narrative merges with the "I" of Helen's reportage and the "you" of the dialogue. The shifting persons stabilize in the "I" of the scene's final sentence, which also stabilizes the meaning: "I have said enough, I think, to convince you that I did well to go to him" (451). The narrative exchange and transgression allow for Helen's behavior here to signify duty instead of willfulness or perversity, to signify her elevation from fallen woman to paragon. Gilbert anticipates this closure: "I see that she was actuated by the best and noblest motives in what she has done" (435). He rejoices: "It was now in my power to clear her name from every foul aspersion. The Millwards and the Wilsons should see, with their own eyes, the bright sun bursting from the cloud—and they should be scorched and dazzled by its beams" (440). His story has, in fact, become her story.

Through the transgressive possibilities of the symbolic code and antithesis, Helen's desire to punish has been enacted as a wish to succor, and, through narrative exchange and transgression, the enigma surrounding her life has been, seemingly, penetrated, and Gilbert's resumed narrative now, seemingly, conveys the "truth." The meaning of Helen's behavior—as triumph rather than fall—is therefore stabilized by Gilbert's narrative. Although it may seem strange to speak of a novel that imbeds a woman's story within a man's as "giving voice" to a woman's desire, we can now appreciate the techniques through which Brontë enacts this process.

Yet a final, difficult aspect of the expression of feminine desire in this text remains unexplored: the representation of courtship and marriage between Gilbert and Helen. As we saw earlier, Gilbert's narrative at first strives to become the traditional story of a male subject's desire for the female as object. That narrative movement is thwarted when Helen becomes the speaking subject of the diary portion of the novel, but it could easily reassert itself as Gilbert regains narrative control in the novel's concluding pages. Indeed,

many critics have been dissatisfied with women's novels that must, it appears, conclude with the traditional wedding bells reaffirming the status quo. To what extent, we must ask, does Brontë elude that resolution in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*?

Clearly we hear wedding bells, but the status quo is destabilized by certain subversive tendencies in the narrative. Huntingdon's death, which allows the meaning of Helen's behavior to be stabilized, radically destabilizes the relationship between Helen and Gilbert, which had been, perforce, limited to "friendship." She is now capable of becoming an object of courtship, but Huntingdon's death has altered the relationship in a more significant manner by making her a wealthy widow, as Gilbert realizes: "there was a wide distinction between the rank and circumstances of Mrs Huntingdon, the lady of Grass-dale Manor, and those of Mrs Graham the artist, the tenant of Wildfell Hall" (454). The class distinction supersedes the gender difference and subverts the gender hierarchy. Gilbert becomes silent, submissive, passive, and acquiescent. He resolves to wait several months and then "send her a letter modestly reminding her of her former permission to write to her" (456). Only his receiving news that Helen is about to remarry goads him out of his passivity.

Again, Gilbert enacts the part of an ardent suitor, determined to save Helen from a bad marriage, but, as he takes on this more active role, we are reimmersed in the world of antitheses. He imagines himself in the role of heroic savior even as he recognizes he might pass "for a madman or an impertinent fool" (465). He goes to her, "winged by this hope, and goaded by these fears" (466). When he discovers he has been mistaken in his information, he resolves to find Helen and speak to her. He seeks her at Grass-dale Manor (Huntingdon's estate) and is impressed by the "park as beautiful now, in its wintry garb, as it could be in its summer glory" (472). He discovers that Helen has removed to Staningly, her uncle's estate, and that she has become even more remote from him through inheriting this property as well. He now feels himself to be, indeed, on a madman's or fool's errand and resolves to return home without seeing Helen. Their fortuitous encounter leaves him silent and forces upon her the role of suitor. She must propose to him and so transgress the boundaries of the masculine and feminine. She plucks a winter rose—a paradoxism particularly within a literary economy that metaphorically aligns the rose with youth and innocence, not with age and experience—and says, "This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of *them* could bear. . . . It is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals—Will you have it?" (484). The paradoxism of a winter rose, the transgression of customary antithesis, prepares for the paradoxism of the assertive woman expressing feminine desire.

In addition, although Gilbert is narrating, Helen is the focalizer of the scene. Gilbert, here a very diffident suitor, hesitates to understand the meaning of the rose, and Helen snatches it back. Finally she is forced to explain, "The rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart," but he is so backward that he must ask, "Would you give me your hand too, if I asked it?" (485). Though he still worries, "But if you *should* repent!" she utters definitive words, "It would be your fault . . . I never shall, unless you bitterly disappoint me" (486). She has focalized the meaning of this event. Her wishes dominate; he is *subject* to her desire, and he is the *object* of her desire.

At the same time that Helen expresses her desire, she closes off the meaning of this story and proleptically concludes all subsequent ones; if she repents, it will be his fault. Gilbert writes his story as her story. She has been defined—and now predefines herself—as the paragon, an exemplar among women. Whereas the angel could only fall in the previous narrative controlled by Victorian ideology, here only Gilbert can fall. However, a tension underlies this resolution. Because the expression of feminine desire depends on transgression and exchange, the stabilization of the narrative in closure seems simultaneously to close off the space for that expression. Not surprisingly, Brontë destabilizes her conclusion by focusing on exchange: Gilbert exchanges the final installment of his narrative with Halford, and he simultaneously anticipates the exchange of Halford's visit.

It is appropriate in a world of antitheses and in the context of their transgression that the ending of the narrative should be just such an advent. Gilbert writes, "We are just now looking forward to the advent of you and Rose, for the time of your annual visit draws nigh, when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social retirement with us" (490). The implied antithesis of country and city gives way to the explicit paradoxisms of "invigorating relaxation" and "social retirement" in the last line of the novel. And "this passage through the world of Antithesis," by keeping open the possibility for transgression, also keeps open a possible space for feminine desire.⁹ If this seems a fragile and tentative resolution—one threatening to reassert the status quo—it is also a radically important one in refusing to postulate an essential female desire existing outside of and independent of the discursive practices that construct women's lives.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 88, 89, 90.
2. Barthes, *S/Z*, 27.
3. Barthes, *S/Z*, 65.

4. Only recently has Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* begun to receive the attention it deserves. The reasons for the neglect are many. See my *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

5. Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 34. All further references are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

6. George Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street* (New York: Boni and Live-right, 1924), 254. On the subject of narrative infelicities in Brontë's *Tenant*, Moore is joined by other, later critics, notably Winifred Gérin, "Introduction," *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 14. However, some fine recent articles have attempted to do more justice to the narrative structure of the novel, particularly as it revises Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. See Jan Gordon, "Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative Tenant and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel," *ELH* 5 (1984): 719–45; and Naomi Jacobs, "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16 (Autumn 1986): 204–19.

7. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 194–211.

8. Barthes, *S/Z*, 26–27.

9. Barthes, *S/Z*, 27.