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"THE LOW, VAGUE HUM OF NUMBERS": THE MALTHUSIAN ECONOMIES OF *JANE EYRE*

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JANE EYRE, CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S QUINTESSENTIAL NOVEL of "hunger, rebellion, and rage" (34),[1] has been in recent years the subject of a number of important critical discussions about food, privation, and the social production of the female bourgeois body. These analyses, generally indebted to the theories of social practice and disciplinary individualism Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish,* tend to focus on issues of anorexia, female desire, and women's agency, reading Jane's intriguing concerns with food as either a rejection of adult female sexual development or as an articulation of other, more abstract desires for psychic or intellectual fulfillment (Hoelever, Michie).[2] Although it seems inevitable that this "cult text of feminism" (Spivak 243) would produce such readings, I wish, in this essay, to shift our focus slightly, to suggest that the novel's obsessive circlings around the issues of food and hunger are centered not so much around the nurturance and development of a specifically female or feminine body, but rather around the peculiar fate of the often ungendered[3] yet extraordinarily vulnerable child's body — a body largely understood, in nineteenth-century social discourse, to be strangely perishable and infinitely prone to danger and decay. Brontë's frightening portraits of childhood starvation and neglect in the Lowood School chapters of *Jane Eyre* can be read as dramatizing the laws of Malthusian economics, speaking powerfully to a range of mid-nineteenth-century social anxieties regarding the relationship between the overproduction of unwanted children and the threat of mass starvation on a national scale. The Lowood Institution, with its overabundance of orphaned, "redundant" children who never get enough to eat, neatly encapsulates the spectre of overpopulation and starvation that posed such difficult problems for many nineteenth-century economic theorists, who often sought to rationalize the inevitability or "naturalness" of hunger while still attempting to ameliorate its effects.

A paradigmatic example of Brontë's interest in the vexed relation between children, hunger, and population is to be found in Jane's early description of one of the Lowood Institution's especially disgusting meals, a small serving of burnt porridge. As with all potential sources of physical pleasure at Lowood, the seemingly private act of eating

becomes exploited, in this instance, as an exemplary instrument of disciplinary control. But this particular description seems especially suggestive:

> Ravenous, and now very faint, I devoured a spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but the first edge of hunger blunted, I perceived I had got in hand a nauseous mess: burnt porridge is almost as bad as rotten potatoes; famine itself soon sickens over it. (39; ch. 5)

Brontë's passing reference to "rotten potatoes" and "famine," I would suggest, is by no means accidental: *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, at the height of Ireland's Great Hunger (1845–49). By the time the English reading public picked up Brontë's novel of "hunger, rebellion, and rage" for the first time, hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens had already perished from starvation and hunger-related illnesses. In this brief passage, Brontë makes an explicit link between the suffering of England's so-called charity children and the condition of the rural Irish, whose already unstable population was rapidly diminishing. The fact that Jane could be of Irish background (as the name "Eyre" hints) might account for such an allusion; Brontë's own Irish heritage suggests that she would be particularly aware of the devastation wrought on the country George Bernard Shaw cynically referred to as "John Bull's Other Island."[4]

Either way, this invocation of the larger world of history and economics is a strategic narrative move on Brontë's part. Her brief but powerful reference to the plight of the Irish helps to make Jane's seemingly incomprehensible suffering tangible; the stark language of famine clearly articulates a world of extreme economic and social disparity that might otherwise seem strangely foreign to the nineteenth-century middle-class reader. To casually align the native Irish with neglected English children redeems them both: the Irish peasantry, often imagined in nineteenth-century race theory to be a "degraded" and "barbaric" race (Curtis, Eagleton 1995), is here rendered young and innocent, the association with children functioning as a recognizable way of signifying purity and innocence. More importantly, however, Jane's individual hunger pangs, which would otherwise seem to affect only her own young body, take on the intimidating dimensions of a national famine, a crisis of enormous proportions. There is more going on here, Brontë seems to suggest, than a stubborn child refusing a poorly-prepared meal; this is an articulation of a crisis of "nurturance" on a national scale.

If the Lowood school's world of starving children can best be illustrated by an analogy with the Irish Famine, its origins and inspiration can be located in another "determining narrative" of the nineteenth century, the world of Malthusian economic theory.[5] Malthus's controversial theory of the relationship between birth rate, food consumption, and national prosperity forms the harsh backdrop to any discussion of child welfare and children's status as a productive labor force during the nineteenth century. Brontë's relentless, almost obsessive attention in the Lowood school chapters to issues of hunger and food distribution invokes contemporary economic discourses surrounding the seemingly necessary relationship between population, resources, and starvation. These discourses of privation and want, of precisely which citizens deserved a place of honor at the nation's family table, highlighted for the Victorian reader pressing questions about what it meant to be part of the "naturalized" English racial family.

The child's peculiar economic status in the newly emergent consumer culture of mid-nineteenth-century Britain was necessarily a vexed one, fraught with confusion over the identity category of "children" itself. At first glance, the vast, seductive array of products, books, and clothes marketed specifically for children and child-sized bodies made the child's presence in the middle-class Victorian family seem a primarily consumptive one, one apparently designed to promote and sustain the British consumer economy. But despite what we now tend to think of as a somewhat sickening over-idealization of the Victorian child as an obvious symbol of the private world of bourgeois domesticity, children inevitably functioned as both consumers *and* producers in this new culture. As Carolyn Steedman reminds us, the fact that mid-century child labor laws were not regularly enforced until the late 1880s should caution us against imagining that the mythologized creature called the "Victorian child" was always nestled safe by the domestic hearth, involved with the tempting world of consumer goods only when they had safely reached the other side of the factory wall. The place of the supposedly innocent, unworldly child as a producer of worldly goods — as "the living mechanism of manufacture" as Marx termed it — was arguably the impetus behind all labor reform in mid-Victorian England (207).[6]

More frighteningly, the sale of orphaned children as domestic servants, still common in Liverpool in the 1880s, as well as popular fears over "white slavery," forces us to imagine the many ways in which the healthy young child-body, so fetishized in nineteenth-century domestic discourse, might always be evaluated as a potentially valuable commodity in its own right. If the mythologized creature known as the child was always already available for purchase, it makes sense that such a category would itself become infinitely precious. The radical enshrinement of the child in Victorian literature and art, its apparent stability as a signifier for the world of innocence and possibility, can thus be seen as an overcompensation for its vexed status in the greater public realm of commerce. At the same time, we might think of calculating and measuring the child's body as a discursive strategy for putting a stop to the poetic over-idealization of childhood by writers such as Blake and Wordsworth, a way of imposing the seemingly objective world of numbers on the greedy child's body, always clamoring, like Oliver Twist, for "more."

As historians of childhood have demonstrated, the image of the vulnerable child was often exploited in nineteenth-century political rhetoric and debate, invoked as the innocent victim of the adult world of parliamentary politics (Cox, Cunningham). A nation's treatment of its youngest, most vulnerable members, in both the nineteenth century and in our own, is generally recognized as a litmus test for the realization of the slippery ideal of the nation-as-family. It is the treatment of children in the workplace that serves as a barometer of national morality; as James Kincaid argues, "workers among the poor can argue that the treatment and condition of [children] is indeed an index of the national character and the national heart" (82). This tendency to abstract the specific conditions of children's lives to more vast statements about political practice was compounded by the fact that child-rearing practice was taking on a new public dimension in the early nineteenth-century; raising a child was now imagined to be a patriotic activity as well as a private one, integral to the tricky processes of both nation-formation and family-building. In this respect, Roger Cox writes, "discourses about childhood acquired a public aspect," rather than simply retaining a private one (82).

The image of the vulnerable child-victim was exacerbated by a general confusion over exactly what constituted the child's proper role as a productive and contributing

member of society. Determining which members of society actually constituted the *genus* "children" was an important first step; as Marx would point out, "capitalistic anthropology" of the 1830s and 40s, reworking the status and rights of child laborers for the Factory Acts, endlessly debated and revised the precise ages at which the period of childhood began and ended (168). If the proper age of the child seemed to be continually shifting for political purposes, so too did the cultural valuation of the child, which was in dramatic flux during the nineteenth century. Viviana Zelizer has argued that the Victorian cult of the child must be understood in light of radical changes in mid-century child labor legislation: the shift from understanding the child as an individual who can productively contribute to the family economy (whose worth can be measured in economic terms), to one who can only supplement the family income in small ways, is compensated for by a cultural over-valuation of the child as "priceless." Middle-class children were effectively idealized as having an emotional value that derived from their exclusion from the public world of labor and commerce. Impoverished children, on the other hand, whose growing bodies relentlessly consumed the nation's resources without contributing to their production, were the subject of both cultural over-idealization and harsh calculation. Children, who could be understood and appreciated as producers, consumers, and even commodities, were thus caught between the twin poles of utilitarian economics and Romantic poetics, a position made more complicated by the fact that Britain's population was both increasing and growing younger in the beginning of the nineteenth century, with "a younger and younger population reaching a height in 1821, when almost four in ten of the population were under fifteen years old" (Cox 78). The apparent overabundance of children, coupled with the fact that infant and child mortality rates were notoriously high in the early nineteenth century, produced a series of confounding questions: Were children a precious or a surplus commodity? Should their value be measured in economic or affective terms?

Jane Eyre, I want to argue, grapples with these questions of value directly, asking us to read the vulnerability of Jane's body against mid-nineteenth century discourses surrounding birthrate, overpopulation, and food distribution. As a dependent orphan who contributes nothing to the familial or national economy, Jane literally embodies the threat of overpopulation and "numbers" that plagued Victorian social theory. While Brontë's interest in the world of starving children and the status of the individual orphaned child is evidenced in *Jane Eyre's* plot, it is also, I want to suggest, thematized at the level of image and metaphor. The language in the Lowood chapters of the novel is inflected by an imagery of mathematics and quantification that, in the context of Brontë's obsessive thematization of starvation and hunger, is unmistakably Malthusian. These representations of childhood neglect and decay, rendered through and made comprehensible by mathematical language, comment succinctly on the discourses of overpopulation, starvation, and poor relief that were in circulation during what came to be popularly known as the "hungry forties."

A REVIEW OF THOMAS MALTHUS'S CONTROVERSIAL THEORY of the relationship between population growth and starvation is useful here. Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798) was written in response to late eighteenth-century utopian visions of social and physical improvement that casually linked a large population to national and racial prosperity. For social and economic

theorists such as Adam Smith and William Godwin, a greatness of numbers necessarily indicated a greatness of nation; an abundance of citizens was a clear, unproblematic signifier for national health and social well-being. In his *Political Discourses,* David Hume confidently asserted that "every wise, just, and moral government, by rendering the condition of its subjects easy and secure, will always abound most in people, as well as in commodities and riches" (Appleman 3). His statement is an exemplary model of Enlightenment discourses that posit a direct and stable link between political efficacy, moral right, and population growth. Similarly, Benjamin Franklin, in an enthusiastic meditation on physical and national fecundity, argued that the "well-regulated" nation would naturally sustain itself through a process of healthy regeneration:

> A nation well regulated is like a polypus: take away a limb, its place is soon supplied . . . thus, if you have room and subsistence enough, as you may, by dividing, make ten polypuses out of one, you may, of one, make ten nations, equally populous and powerful; or rather, increase the nation tenfold in numbers and strength. (171–72)

For Franklin, the exponential nature of human reproduction is itself a positive virtue, one that ensures national strength and stability. As Frances Ferguson suggests, "the persistent and pervasive assumption [in these discourses] was that populousness was a positive value, and that one could indicate the virtuousness of any cause by establishing a causal connection between it and an ample population" (110). The natural world's seemingly infinite capacity for growth and reproduction is thus taken as an indication of an individual nation's spiritual, political and, by extension, economic strength.

Malthus, by contrast, argued that a nation's population growth, generally considered to be a reliable index of national health and prosperity, would actually function as the source of vice, misery, and degradation. The beauty of Malthus's counterintuitive argument was its use of mathematical logic, a logic almost blinding in its apparent simplicity. As Malthus himself suggested, only a "slight acquaintance with numbers" was necessary to understand his thesis (20). The theory presented in the *Essay* proceeded from the basic mathematical principle that while the human race increases exponentially, crops can only grow arithmetically. As Malthus repeatedly expressed it, "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio" (20). Within a few generations, "the power of population being a power of superior order," the human population would necessarily outstrip the amount of food available for consumption (23). Because man's essentially animalistic nature kept him in thrall to the laws of procreation ("impelled him" as Malthus put it, "to the increase of his species" [23]), he would forever struggle to find enough food to eat; this struggle condemned society as a whole "to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery" (17). For Malthus, as Catherine Gallagher suggests, it is specifically "the unleashed power of population, the reproducing body, [that will] eventually destroy the very prosperity that made it fecund, replacing health and innocence with misery and vice" (1987; 84). Malthus's theory was thus original in seeing the human capacity for healthy reproduction as containing the potential for racial degeneration rather than prosperity. Such a theory meant that the general unhappiness of the human condition originated in what for the Victorians would become a source of other major cultural anxieties: the desiring body.

While later social reformers would locate the answer to the problem of human sexuality and reproduction in the social or public realm, Malthus sought the solution to the problem of excessive population growth at its source, in the world of the "natural." It was necessarily logical, Malthus reasoned, that nature, struggling to keep up with man's ever-increasing numbers, would impose a series of "positive checks" on population growth, natural remedies that would help to keep otherwise endlessly proliferating populations in line. The most potent of these checks were pestilence and famine, checks which had their most devastating and obvious effects on the rural poor and dispossessed, Malthus's "lower orders of society" (36). Although Malthus argued from the very beginning of his polemic that he was "actuated solely by a love of truth, and not by any prejudices against any particular set of men," his theory, as he elaborated it, suggested that most efforts at relief merely prolonged the sufferings of the poor, and that starvation, though horrible, ultimately worked to strengthen the remaining (though still struggling) population (1). It was in this particular aspect of Malthus's work that nineteenth-century utilitarian economists and Benthamite supporters found an apparently scientific and mathematical rationale for the discontinuation of social welfare programs and the implementation of "reforms" such as the 1834 Poor Law Amendment. These sentiments reach their apotheosis in Malthus's discussion of the inevitability of famine, which he cites as a final "positive check" to population increase:

> Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature . . . The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success still be incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow, levels the population with the food of the world. (56, qtd. in Morash 20)

The progress narrative invoked in this passage ("should they fail in this war of extermination;" "Should success still be incomplete") was understandably repellent to Malthus's detractors. In this passage and elsewhere, Malthus effectively translates the language of physical devastation and destruction into a discourse of social and moral improvement; as Christopher Morash argues, "what Malthus provided for the idea of progress was a strategy, sanctioned by the discourses of demography and economics, which wrote 'premature death' and the 'ministers of depopulation' not as the opponents of progress, but as the agents of [economic and social] progress" (20). Malthus's argument seemed to give a scientific edge and stability to the commonplace and already somewhat degraded metaphor of the "body politic," providing an apparently scientific and objective basis for later arguments against the efficacy of poor laws and even parish charity. As Marx would point out, Malthus's argument did not bode well for the working poor, who were already seen as being conveniently dispensable and endlessly replaceable; as he writes, "what experience shows to the capitalist generally is a constant excess of population . . . although this excess is made up of generations of human beings stunted, short-lived, swiftly replacing each other, plucked, so to say, before maturity" (165). Taken to its logical extreme, Malthus's theory made physical suffering and mass starvation seem necessary and inevi-

table, the work of Nature rather than Culture, something no amount of well-intentioned social legislation could adequately counter.[7]

Malthus's controversial yet supremely logical theory, and the extreme reactions it provoked throughout the political spectrum, ensured that his name would be invoked throughout the nineteenth-century in public debates surrounding the relationship between population, resources, and starvation. Writers as different as Marx and Carlyle hated the *Essay,* while Darwin would cite it, in his *Autobiography,* as one of the most important sources for his *Origin of Species* (Himmelfarb 159–67). Robert Southey decried the "mediocrity" of Malthus's analysis, attributing its popularity to the "sort of insipidly which seems as well suited to a weak intellect, as panda and calves feet to a debilitated stomach . . . the temporary reputation which Mr. Malthus [has] obtained . . . is disgraceful to our age" (78–79). Interestingly, historians of economic theory have long maintained that Malthus's argument was not particularly original; his ideas had been anticipated by (among others) Sir Walter Raleigh, Arthur Young, Adam Smith, and Joseph Townsend (Smith 7–32). As Marx would argue, "[the *Essay*] in its first form is nothing more than a schoolboyish, superficial plagiary of De Foe, Sir James Steuart, Townsend, Franklin, Wallace, etc., and does not contain a single sentence thought out by [Malthus] himself" (488). But Malthus had the good luck to publish his first edition of the *Essay* at the very end of the eighteenth century, when national passions about population ran high: the French Revolution had contributed quite powerfully to British anxieties about the interrelationship between numbers, hunger, and social instability. The anxious relationship between population and revolution is particularly suggestive, for the purpose of this analysis, in that children themselves were beginning to be thought of as a specific social group of individuals with their own peculiar agency and even rights. Roger Cox has argued that the growing perception of "children as a class, [as] a category who might disturb the social order," may have been compounded by the events of the French Revolution; as he writes, "In 1799 Hannah More complained that children had 'adopted something of that spirit of independence, and disdain of control, which characterise the times'" (79).

Malthus's argument was considered particularly dangerous, and especially fascinating, because of its focus on the necessary disposability of the child's body. It was not until the second edition of the *Essay* (1803) that the Parson Malthus would add "Moral Restraint" to his list of positive checks to population growth, resulting in the later (somewhat inaccurate) use of the term "Malthusianism" as a synonym for birth control. (Marx commends Malthus for at least being consistent in taking a vow of celibacy while asking the poor to check their "lower" impulses.) For Malthus, the continual production or reproduction of poor children appeared to be a mathematical given, neatly rationalized under the law of numbers; as he writes, "the passion between the sexes has appeared in every age to be so nearly the same that it may always be considered, in algebraic language, as a given quantity" (52). Nature's "positive checks," therefore, inevitably involved the spectre of poor children starving, suffering, and dying. Not surprisingly, Malthus's statements on the necessary death of impoverished children were considered particularly heartless (e.g., "the actual distresses of some of the lower classes, by which they are disabled from giving the proper food and attention to their children, acts as a positive check to the natural increase of population" [34]).

Malthus's theory of population control can thus be read as a perverse rewriting of Rousseau's idealization of the Child-in-Nature. In Malthus's scenario, Nature functions as a neglectful, rather than nurturing, parent; she does not sustain children so much as she "liberates" them from a life of poverty and degradation. In presenting the seemingly counterintuitive argument that Nature protected her impoverished young by killing them early, Malthus flew directly in the face of Romantic idealism, forever changing the way in which childhood, as a state of being, would be imagined. As such, it should not surprise us that the spectre of Malthusian economics might haunt what is often considered to be the ultimate novel of Romantic idealism, *Jane Eyre,* a narrative of childhood consciousness and development that is structured by a struggle for survival on multiple levels. Jane, who announces from the beginning of the narrative that she hates to take long walks with the other children because she is "humbled by the consciousness of [her] physical inferiority," hardly seems destined to live (1; ch. 1). Her story can be read as an almost bizarrely detailed depiction of her physical needs and hungers, an obsessive recounting of the experiences recorded by the vulnerable child's body.

Jane's orphaned body, with its "violent" passions, strange temperaments, and "mutinous" rebellions, is a source of epistemological anxiety from the beginning of the novel. Jane is initially defined by her physical difference from the rest of the Reeds, and accepts this apparent difference as a logical and reasonable basis for her rejection from the family. As she tells us, "I was like nobody there . . . They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities" (12; ch.2). In these opening moments of the narrative, Jane is repeatedly characterized as being either a member of another species (a "bad animal" [7; ch.1], "a little toad" [21; ch.3], a "rat" [9; ch.2]) or another race ("an interloper not of [Mrs. Reed's] race . . . an uncongenial alien" [13; ch. 2]).[8] The "natural" family's difficulty in adequately placing Jane within a familiar racial or class framework is further suggested by her narrative alignment, as Susan Meyer has cogently argued, with the mutinous people of the West Indies and rebellious political figures more generally. The disobedient child who is given "credit for being a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes" and is imagined to be "scheming plots underhand" (21; ch.3), conceives of her one outburst to John Reed as a "moment's mutiny," the work of a "rebel slave" (9; ch.2). Jane's persistent struggle to define herself in relation to the existing family order (one that simultaneously includes and excludes her) is, the narrative suggests, intimately related to larger questions of mid-nineteenth-century colonial rule and "authentic" British national identity.

If the relationship of Britannia to her colonial "children" was necessarily a vexed one, so too is Jane's relationship with the Reeds, who don't know quite how to master and subdue her. Jane's alien status within the Reed household is presented first and foremost as a problem of origins. Though Jane is biologically related to the Reeds, she is constructed as the alien other/orphan of potentially degraded racial or class origins, origins that are a source of much anxiety in their uncertainty. When the kindly Dr. Lloyd first asks Jane why she is such an unhappy child, her immediate response is "I have no father or mother, or brothers or sisters" (19; ch.3); for Jane, such a response effectively accounts for her seemingly foreign status within the only family she has ever known. If Jane's orphan-body seems strangely foreign, "an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on [the] family group" (13; ch. 2), it is also a body that competes with the "natural" members of the family

for scant resources. Even as she narrates her own story, and struggles to place herself within this perverse family dynamic, Jane represents herself as an extra or redundant child, one whose growing body threatens to take resources away from other hungry mouths.

This threat of childhood parasitism is primarily articulated through a language of production and consumption; Jane's body is evaluated not in moral or affective terms but rather in economic terms. Jane is a particularly wasteful, draining figure, John Reed argues, because she contributes nothing to the household domestic economy: "[Y]ou have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do" (8; ch. 1). Here, John Reed makes a distinction between the hunger of charity children and gentlemen's children, whose class status effectively protects them from the horror of begging. The shared physical experience of hunger, which would seem to collapse differences of class and caste, here only serves to reify them.[9] Jane herself subscribes to this available system of family values, conceiving of herself as having no essential use-value within this strange family economy; as she explains to herself and the reader, she is a "useless thing, incapable of serving their interest, or adding to their pleasure" (12; ch. 12). The novel further suggests that those who don't contribute to the household economy are in danger of being consumed themselves, of serving as food for others. Jane imagines that John, who "gorge[s] himself habitually at table," may feel disposed to devour her; as she puts it, "every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near" (7; ch. 1). If Jane has internalized the Reeds' persuasive argument that "she has no right . . . to eat, to consume when she produces nothing" (Hoelever 116), this childhood fantasy of cannibalism and incorporation suggests that she can only value herself as a potentially consumable resource.

Jane's supposed inability to contribute to the cycle of production and consumption ensures her alien status within the Reed's staunchly middle-class community. When the beleaguered Jane protests that she does not have to obey John Reed, as he is not her master, the housemaid Abbot quickly reminds her that her status within the family is not only ambiguous but wasteful: "[Y]ou are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep" (9; ch. 2). Here, Abbot, whose household value as a servant is clearly defined and demarcated, uses a logic of quantification to figure out Jane's epistemelogically uncertain position within the otherwise stable family structure: the orphaned Jane must be "less than" a servant, since she apparently produces "nothing." According to the logic of the Reeds' perverse family values, Jane's inability to add affection or sustenance to the family unit means that she is constantly depleting resources from what otherwise functions as an apparently self-sufficient household.[10]

If childhood in the nineteenth century is constructed, as Carolyn Steedman has suggested, as a category of dependency, it becomes even more so for the orphaned child, whose very existence seems predicated on acts of charity. Within the domestic confines of Gateshead, it is Jane's precarious position as an orphaned, seemingly alien other that renders her economically and socially useless, rather than simply her status as a generic "child." There is a distinction made in this regard between Jane and the family's "natural" children; although Jane, who does assist with household chores, is constructed as having no particular economic value, the Reeds are perfectly willing to sustain the fiction that

young Eliza, with her "turn for traffic," and "marked propensity for saving," actually contributes to the family economy (24; ch. 4). Eliza, who tends the family's chickens and then sells their eggs to the housekeeper, is constantly engaged not only in the "vending of eggs and chickens" but also in "driving hard bargains with the gardener about flower-roots, seeds, and slips of plants," the gardener being under strict orders from Mrs. Reed, Jane tells us, to make these purchases (24; ch. 4). The linked cycles of reproduction and economic production are thus brought together in these tiny commercial transactions; Eliza (whose biological mother oversees the whole operation) makes money from the selling of seeds and eggs. Eliza's childish but apparently profitable capacity for "trade" marks her as a contributing member of the natural family, and the entire household unit of family and servants conspire in this fiction.

Jane, by contrast, is constructed within the family dynamic as a parasitical figure, one who only consumes, giving nothing back to the household. We should remember that for the Victorian reader, it was Jane's apparent greediness, her determined refusal to feel grateful to the Reeds, that made her seem particularly shocking, that coded her as even more transgressive in an era of grateful Oliver Twists. As Elizabeth Rigby's infamous 1848 review of the novel put it, "It pleased God to make [Jane] an orphan, friendless, and penniless — yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him . . . no one would think that she owed anything to God above or to man below" (*Jane Eyre* 442). Rigby's critique of the novel is based on Jane's unwillingness to apologize for her dependent, orphaned status, the very subject-position that makes her a sympathetic character in the first place.

The discourses of dependency and consumption that structure relations in the Reed household become an almost unconscious part of Jane's internalized sense of class position and personal worth: "[The] reproach of my dependence had become a vague sing-song in my ear; very painful and crushing, but only half intelligible" (10; ch. 2). In this light, Jane's constricted cry for freedom at Lowood ("Grant me at least a new servitude!" [74; ch. 10]) is thus not quite as pathetic or self-abasing as it first seems; Jane's sense of self-worth is predicated on a vision of herself as a productive wage-earner. For Jane, who notably shares many of the same class biases with the Reeds (Eagleton 1975) "poverty [is] synonymous with degradation"; as she famously tells us, she is not "heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (20; ch. 3). At this point in the narrative, Jane is unable to understand herself as a potentially contributing member of the family.

Jane's solution to this problem of dependency is, strikingly, to remove her consuming, seemingly non-productive child-body from the Reed household. In the famous Red Room scene, Jane resorts to a fantasy not of revenge or self-assertion, but of self-starvation and self-erasure:

> Resolve . . . instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression — as running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die. (12; ch. 2)

Here, Jane constructs herself as an "independent" body — that is, as a non-dependent, non-consuming body, one that does not need to be a part of the paradigmatic middle-class family structure. She imaginatively removes herself from the endless cycle of production and consumption that defines familial relations in the Reed household, reasoning that the

slow and intimate process of self-starvation (rather than the violent "mutiny" of which she is so often accused) will result in an escape from the "oppression" and abuse her needy body seems to experience on a daily basis. Powerless and dependent, the only material resource she has control over in this property-obsessed family is her own body, and it is a limited control at that, as her incarceration in the Red Room attests. But Jane is caught in a double bind: if consuming the Reeds' resources is read, in this household, as a kind of stealing, a way of claiming material goods which she has not earned, so too is anorexia, which seems to be a way of taking back the greedy, insatiable body she barely owns. In plotting her anorexic behavior, Jane worries nervously that self-starvation "certainly was a crime," one with severe moral consequences: "All said I was wicked, and perhaps I might be so: what thought had I been but just conceiving of starving myself to death?" (13; ch. 2).

Jane will stage repeat performances of this seemingly anorexic behavior when she exchanges the domestic incarceration of Gateshead for the more explicitly institutionalized confines of Lowood. On her way to the school, Jane tells us that she is unable to eat, for "Few children can eat when excited with the thoughts of a journey" (34; ch. 5), and that although a guard at an inn "wanted me to have some dinner . . . I had no appetite" (35–36; ch. 5). When she initially arrives at the daunting institution she expresses no interest in food, telling us that "excitement and fatigue render[ed] [her] incapable of eating" (38; ch. 5); by the next day, however, she is "nearly sick from inanition, having taken so little the day before" (39; ch. 5). It seems that for Jane, recounting these moments of eating or rejecting food will become an integral part of the way she conceptualizes and subsequently narrates her story. (As Hoeveler points out, even "[T]he first paragraph of the novel situates Jane in relation to the dinner hour; this child is perpetually gnawed by hunger" [116].) But Jane will soon discover that the decision to consume or reject food is not hers to make; having the power to refuse food is a privilege reserved for aristocratic heroines, not dependent orphans. She will have no personal control here over the distribution of food; all physical luxuries, even of the most basic sort, are in scant supply at Lowood, which encourages and trains young children in the disciplinary practices of self-restraint and self-mortification.

It is at this point in the narrative that the Malthusian economies of the novel really emerge; Jane will begin to use the logic of mathematics as a way to make sense of Lowood's strange and seemingly irrational economies of hunger and privation. On her first morning in residence, Jane shrewdly calculates that the sheer number of children will make it difficult to compete for the barest of necessities: as she puts it, "there was but one [wash]basin to six girls" (38; ch. 5). Remember that Jane is initially overwhelmed by the sheer number of bodies at Lowood; when she first sees the "congregation of girls" in the schoolroom they seem to her to be of infinite number, incalculable ("Seen by the dim light of the dips, their number to me appeared countless, though not in reality exceeding eighty" [37; ch.5]). Jane's apparent inability to count the exact number of cold and hungry children, even as she is able to figure out the precise ratio of washbasins to girls, suggests a mind desperately calculating its chances for survival in a harsh and unforgiving environment.

Structured by the tension between the "scanty supply of food" and the "keen appetites of growing children" (52; ch. 7), daily life at Lowood involves an explicit competition between vast numbers of unwanted children for severely limited amounts of food:

Lowood is an institution where little girls feed off of one another like little vampires. Jane describes the strict rationing of food, and the competition it engenders, in detail:

> [We] had scarcely sufficient to keep alive a delicate invalid. From this deficiency of nourishment resulted an abuse, which pressed hardly on the younger pupils: whenever the famished great girls had an opportunity, they would coax or menace the little ones out of their portion. Many a time I have shared between two claimants the precious morsel of brown bread distributed at tea-time; and after relinquishing to a third, half the contents of my mug of coffee, I have swallowed the remainder with an accompaniment of secret tears, forced from me by the exigency of hunger. (52; ch. 7)

Here, Jane must learn another kind of mathematics, one that will allow her to make sense of Lowood's deficiency of physical and spiritual nourishment. Jane's ability to calculate the precise amount of food she will be forced to surrender to the "great girls" is presented through a specific language of measurement and quantification (the "two" claimants, the "third" claimant who takes "half" the mug of coffee, leaving Jane with only a scant "remainder"). All social relations at Lowood are ultimately reducible to this sort of equation, one that measures who gives and who takes, who "adds" and who "subtracts" resources from the limited supply of food. While Jane learned at Gateshead that she was nothing because she produced nothing, Lowood's cruel economy forces Jane to provide or produce food for other children. Jane will describe the "pernicious proportion[s]" of the Sunday meals in similar mathematical terms: "A little solace came at tea-time, in the shape of a *double* ration of bread — a *whole,* instead of a *half,* slice — with the delicious *addition* of a thin scrape of butter . . . I generally contrived to reserve a moiety of this bounteous repast for myself; but the *remainder* I was invariably obliged to part with" (52; ch. 7; emphasis mine).

If Jane feels that Lowood is perpetually haunted by the "low, vague hum of numbers" (38; ch. 5), if her experience there is primarily structured by a process of endless counting and calculation, she is not alone. The Lowood administration is ruled by the logic of quantification, a logic that seeks to tame the unruly "lusts of the flesh" and tendencies toward "self-indulgence" that would apparently otherwise spoil the young orphans. In this sense, we can read Lowood as being a Benthamite-like institution not only in its reliance on a panopticon-like system of surveillance and discipline, but also in its administration's apparent fascination with mathematical logic. For Bentham, who would attempt to map out the intricacies of human "springs" or drives in a series of painstakingly-detailed tables, all human action can be reduced to an ultimately quantifiable, universal system of "pleasures and pains." As he argued in *Deontology,* "There are few moral questions which may not be resolved, with an accuracy and certainty not far removed from mathematical demonstration. . . . The immoral action is merely a miscalculation of self-interest, an erroneous estimate" (8, 31). Bentham's argument that all human activity and hence social legislation could be reasonably quantified by what he called the "felicific calculus" functioned as a natural outgrowth of Malthusian economic theory, suggesting as it did that institutional structures would best be served by the strict application of mathematical logic, not simply in resolving moral questions, but in determining which actions would famously provide "the greatest good for the greatest number." Similarly, it is the divine

will of mathematics and quantification that determines the everyday bodily experiences of the orphaned children at Lowood, where all objects of physical relief or comfort are subject to Brocklehurst's obsessive system of measurement and calculation; he instructs the headmistress not to give out "more than one [needle] at a time" to her charges; and is shocked to find that some of the girls have had "two clean tuckers" in a single week ("It is too much, the rules limit them to one" [54; ch. 7]). The most contested site of calculation and control, however, is that of the children's food, every scrap of which must be measured in minute detail. Brocklehurst's entire distribution system is threatened by Miss Temple's unexpected decision to authorize two extra meals for the students ("I find, in settling the accounts with the housekeeper, that a lunch consisting of bread and cheese, has twice been served out to the girls during the past fortnight. How is this? I look over the regulations, and I find no such meal as lunch mentioned" [54; ch. 7]). Brocklehurst's mathematical, implicitly "objective," utilitarian logic is juxtaposed with Miss Temple's more subjective interpretive strategies, strategies the novel codes as responsibly feminine and maternal.

But Miss Temple can only provide temporary relief; at Lowood, suffering children are ultimately quantifiable. Calculation is thus linked to institutional prohibitions against embodiment, which implicitly threatens to disrupt the logic of quantification and objectivity. This translation of desiring bodies into discrete numbers is encouraged by the evangelical discourse of Lowood, which similarly encourages the young girls to find satisfaction outside of the physical realm. That the properly quantified and disciplined body is a disembodied one is made explicit in Brocklehurst's lengthy rationalization for serving the children burnt porridge:

> [M]y plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralised by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution . . . A brief address on these occasions would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to . . . his warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to His divine consolations, 'If ye suffer hunger or thirst for my sake, happy are ye' . . . When you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls! (54; ch. 7)

For Brocklehurst, replacing the children's burnt meal would clearly "obviate the aims of this institution," as such an action would only demonstrate the degree to which its members' apparently strong religious beliefs were easily challenged by mere "disappointments of the appetite" (54; ch. 7). The discourse of physical deferral and spiritual satisfaction Brocklehurst presents for the children recalls the political-religious theories of the Reverend Thomas Chalmers, whose lectures "transformed desire from a bodily appetite focused on material gratification into a social hunger inflamed (and assuaged) by less tangible sustenance" (Poovey 100). In Chalmers's works, "appetite" emerges as a signifier for both religious and physical desire, desires which are, with proper religious guidance and instruction, ultimately interchangeable, capable of satisfying one another. In a discus-

sion of Chalmers's suggestion that the proper cultivation of a religious appetite could help to satisfy the physical demands of the starving poor, Mary Poovey writes,

> For poor and working men and women, the stick so generously wielded by Providence was hunger; the carrot was the spiritual reward that would accompany poor men's "elevating their minds above their passionate flesh." . . . As Chalmers never tired of reiterating, there is no "natural appetite" for Christian instruction: "it is just as necessary to create a spiritual hunger, as it is to afford spiritual refreshment." (104)

Similarly, Brocklehurst's almost sadistic fantasy that literal food can be adequately replaced by the word of God — his strangely materialist interpretation of Scripture — presents a direct threat to the physical survival of Lowood's inmates, the "vile bodies" already suffering from inadequate warmth and nutrition. In this sermon, Brocklehurst echoes his earlier narrative about the young boy who would rather have "a verse of a Psalm to learn" than a "gingerbread nut"; as Brocklehurst points out, the boy's willingness to choose to Psalm over the sweet results in his receiving "two nuts in recompense for his infant piety" (28; ch. 4). In this instance, however, piety functions as a *substitute* rather than a precondition for sustenance; the children are encouraged to fill their souls, not their stomachs.

At Lowood, therefore, evangelical discourse conspires with utilitarian models of education to tame the physical "lusts" or demands of the child-body through excessive measurement and quantification. That mathematics and its various logics will serve as Jane's enemy rather than her friend is literally realized during the chapter in which Brocklehurst delivers his sermon, a scene which quickly becomes transformed, for Jane, into a spectacle of public humiliation. Jane is engaged in "puzzling over a sum in long division" during Brocklehurst's discussion of burning souls and burnt meals. As Brocklehurst's "long stride measure[s] the classroom" (53; ch. 7) Jane tries to elude his observation by hiding behind her slate: "I had sat well back on the form, and while seeming to be busy with my sum, had held my slate in such a manner as to conceal my face" (56; ch. 7). But if Jane thinks that numbers will somehow protect and shield her vulnerable body, if she imagines that the slate will "secure [her] personal safety," she is terribly wrong; as she puts it, "my treacherous slate somehow happened to slip from my hand and falling with an obtrusive crash, directly [drew] every eye upon me" (56; ch. 7). In this important scene, Jane is literally betrayed by mathematics, epitomizing the novel's thematization of mathematical logic and foreshadowing the Malthusian dynamics of the school's typhoid epidemic, which will emerge in the following chapters.

For it is after this classroom scene of humiliation, after this strangely public betrayal by numbers, that Jane once again exhibits anorexic behavior, despite the obviously inadequate nourishment she has been receiving. When Helen Burns, herself a model of female abstinence and renunciation (Gilbert and Gubar, Hoelever) tries to console Jane with a meal of coffee and bread, she refuses it, telling us that she "[feels] as if a drop or a crumb would have choked me in my present condition" (59; ch. 28). Jane's newfound distrust of numbers is made explicit in the following exchange about truth and lying:

> "Helen, why do you stay with a girl whom everybody believes to be a liar?"
> "Everybody, Jane? Why, there are only eighty people who have heard you called so, and the

> world contains hundreds of millions."
> "But what have I to do with millions? The eighty I know despise me." (60; ch. 8)

It should not surprise us that Jane, with her "habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, [and] forlorn depression," might be prepared in this instance to calculate precisely how many of the other children despise her (13; ch. 2). But this scene of quantification and self-doubt is merely early training for the more chilling use of mathematics which will come later, when Jane counts the number of young girls who grow ill and die during Lowood's typhoid epidemic, an epidemic made worse by the poor amounts of food the children have been eating. As Jane tells the reader, it is specifically Lowood's lack of adequate sustenance that causes the disease to be a fatal one: "Semi-starvation and neglected colds had predisposed most of the pupils to receive infection: forty-five out of the eighty girls lay ill at one time" (66; ch. 9). The bodies that once seemed intimidatingly "incalculable" and "indefinite" in their youthful misery are now easily quantifiable, sharply differentiated by the more rigorous demarcations of health and illness.

For Jane, counting the surviving bodies of her fellow schoolmates is not simply an intellectual or academic exercise: her strength, the reader slowly realizes with horror, is inversely proportional to that of the dying children. It is during this season of "fog-bred pestilence" that Jane, and the rest of the institutionalized children who stay healthy, actually grow stronger, for they do not have to compete with others for sufficient meals, as there are "fewer to feed" (67; ch. 9). While the infected girls grow thin and die, Jane, perversely enough, "dines sumptuously" (67; ch. 9) and experiences a sort of rebirth:

> They let us [the healthy girls] ramble in the wood, like gipsies, from morning till night; we did what we liked, went where we liked: we lived better too . . . there were fewer to feed; the sick could eat little; our breakfast-basins were better filled: when there was no time to prepare a regular dinner, which often happened, [the cook] would give us a large piece of cold pie, or a thick slice of bread and cheese, and this we carried away with us to the wood, where we each chose the spot we liked best, and dined sumptuously. (67; ch.9)

Here is Malthus's theory of overpopulation and famine writ small: Jane gains strength off the sickness of the other girls; her body literally grows stronger as the other children sicken and die. If Jane's supposed racial indeterminacy was a source of degradation and anxiety in the Gateshead section of the novel, it is here rewritten, in this new incarnation of "gipsyness," as an indication of physical vigor and superiority. Jane's physical triumph, her apparent rebirth, is predicated on the physical deterioration of the school's other orphans; the deaths of the other children allow Jane, as she puts it, to "live better," for the prohibitive rules of the strict educational institution are finally "relaxed" (66; ch. 9).

Finally, the Malthusian battle between the forces of population and nature is manifested in the apparent triumph of nature in this chapter, for while the bodies of the young Lowood girls degenerate and die, the natural world proliferates and blossoms — as Jane puts it, "vegetation mature[s] with vigour" (66; ch. 9). Nature emerges, in the novel's painful discussion of childhood death and decay, as a creature of capricious and perverse beauty: "[The] garden . . . glowed with flowers; hollyhocks had sprung up tall as trees, lilies had opened, tulips and roses were in bloom; the borders of the little beds were gay with pink thrift and crimson double-daisies . . . " (67; ch. 9). This seemingly endless de-

scription of the frivolous beauties of nature is ironically juxtaposed against the deaths of the institution's young children: "these fragrant treasures were all useless for most of the inmates of Lowood, except to furnish now and then a handful of herbs and blossoms to put in a coffin" (67; ch. 9). Here, fickle nature, the source of famine and illness, emerges in almost poetic terms as a triumphant and scornful figure, one that has proved its necessary superiority over Malthus's otherwise unstoppable power of population.

That Brontë's narrative of childhood consciousness ultimately fulfills the terms of the Malthusian doctrine it otherwise seems to critique is both disturbing and suggestive. Malthus's narrative is in many ways locked in a struggle for survival with Brontë's own, which would seem, for its continuation, to be dependent on its heroine's physical success. That both narratives ultimately *do* survive and indeed coexist in the same story suggests that the numeric laws of Malthusian economy can be usefully exploited for literary as well as political purposes: Jane's ability to beat the odds against starvation demonstrates a heroic fitness that the other children at Lowood apparently lack. In surviving the school's typhoid epidemic, Jane demonstrates that she is indeed "destined to live," that her apparent physical inferiority masks a deeper ability to survive, one not bound, it seems, by the tenets of science or the principles of mathematics. Jane's ultimate survival against Malthus's terrible odds tells us that she is not merely a surplus product, but rather a valuable heroine; one, Brontë seems to suggest, who is very much worth the gamble.

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NOTES

1. This quotation is taken from Matthew Arnold, writing to Jane Arnold in 1853. Although Arnold is speaking about *Villette* in this letter, his characterization of Brontë's mental state, and the prose it engenders, seems equally applicable — if not more so — to *Jane Eyre.*
2. In this context, Jane's refusal to eat as a child at Gateshead is interpreted as a specifically feminine form of passive resistance; the scenes in which she wanders starving and alone after fleeing Thornfield are read as her ability to give voice to her own romantic and sexual desires after the wedding-day fiasco.
3. For a discussion of the non-gender-specific nature of the child's body in the nineteenth century, see Kincaid.
4. On the Brontës' Irish identity, see Eagleton 1985, 1–26.
5. I take the phrase "determining narrative" from Morash's excellent study of the representation of the Irish Famine in British literature and culture.
6. Importantly, Marx was not opposed to the idea of child labor in itself; what he decried were the specific conditions in which children worked under capital. As he notes in *Capital,* "[M]odern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes" (294). For a discussion of the intimate relationship between discourses of child welfare and labor reform more generally, see Gallagher 1985.
7. Malthus's writings regarding poor relief reproduce common assumptions about lower class "laziness:" "[The poor laws] generate that carelessness and want of frugality observable among the poor, so contrary to the disposition frequently to be remarked among petty tradesmen and small farmers. The labouring poor, to use a vulgar expression, always seem to live from hand to mouth . . . the poor laws of England may therefore be said to diminish

both the power and the will to save among the common people, and thus to weaken one of the strongest incentives to sobriety and industry, and consequently to happiness" (40).

8. On childhood as a specifically racial category, see Kaplan.
9. We might think here of Zillah Eisenstein's observation that "it is ironic that the body, the one thing all human beings have in common, becomes a site for demarcating difference, hate, and pain" (34).
10. Later, or course, Jane will trade her status as "orphan" for that of "governess," an equally problematic and ambiguous identity within the Victorian family structure. Though Jane will strive to earn her keep, Rochester will constantly forget that she is an employee, rather than a dependent: he is forever forgetting to pay her salary. While Rochester's inability to view Jane as a employee can obviously be read as an erotic gesture, his instinctive reading of her as a "natural" member of his family; it also places Jane, once again, in an uncomfortable position of dependence and charity. For a discussion of the confusing economic and sexual status of the Victorian governess, see Peterson.

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