Communicating with *Jane Eyre*: Stagecoach, Mail, and the Tory Nation

RUTH LIVESEY

What does it mean to write in an age in which the means of receiving and distributing the written word are changing irrevocably before one’s eyes? This question has recently produced a wealth of scholarship exploring the textual effects of nineteenth-century innovations in communications technology, as present-day concerns relating to the disappearance of the material text are refracted through the lens of Victorian studies.¹ New technologies—including the railway, the telegraph, the telegram, and recorded sound (and the electronic book and Skype)—leave textual traces of the emergence of structures of feeling needed to manage their innovations; so too does the persistence of the outdated carry its own charge of political and social affect. Getting a long-disused fountain pen to flow, writing with a now unpractised hand, finding a stamp, putting a letter in the postbox: these once ordinary practices of communication become—within a decade—either conscious exercises in ceremony or marked acts of resistance to mainstream modernity. The rapid dominance of electronic mail has not made handwritten letters obsolete, but it has left the latter with an aura of conservative intimacy.

What is left behind in the era of progress does not disappear, or at least not all at once; old technology remains alongside the new. To write through (and of) it requires something much thornier than nostalgia: that effort reflects a resistance to linear progress that inscribes alternative

**Abstract:** Critics have long read *Jane Eyre* as an exemplary account of liberal individualism and self-expression. This essay instead argues that the novel, written in the 1840s and depicting the 1820s, employs the stagecoach as a Tory emblem of a Britain unified through the preservation of regional customs, against an increasingly dominant railway network. Radical though Jane Eyre’s claims to speak and feel may be from the perspective of liberal narratives of progressive individualism, they are best understood in this Tory context of anti-metropolitan regionalism and preservationism. Jane’s self-assertions are momentary staging posts in a journey that preserves customary regional community. The stagecoach knits the smallest, most remote places and persons into the nation while preserving their distinct identities. It is a resistant Tory mode of inscribing an alternative modernity in the era of progress.
modernities. To remain within older technological frames in an era of innovation is not to go backward or remain stuck, but can instead imply going forward along a different track. Writing of the shift from road to rail, stagecoach to railway carriage, Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests that it is only during a fixed window, “the transitional period,” that travelers experience a “sense of loss due to the mechanization of travel.” It “does not take long for the industrialization of the means of transport to alter the consciousness of the passengers,” he argues, “they develop a new set of perceptions” (18).

If this new set of perceptions displaced stagecoach sensibility and oriented passengers to industrialized transport as swiftly as Schivelbusch suggests—in the course of a journey or two—then what of the effects of long-distance road travel, an important mode of transit well into the late 1840s? In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, as the railways started to bristle out from large urban centers, the continued presence of the outmoded was, quite literally, at the end of most streets. Turnpike roads that carried stage- and Royal Mail coaches gradually were emptied of nationally systematized traffic and traversed by local carriages, omnibuses, or slow carriers’ carts taking freight and the odd, less-affluent passenger. In one of Charles Dickens’s many reflections on the railway’s displacement of stage- and mail-coaches, “An Old Stage-Coaching House” (1863), the “Uncommercial Traveller” visits a former coaching town “in its degeneracy” (271). The inn, the coach-maker, and the carriages themselves are still present at a time when road had given way to rail. Nobody now passes through the former transport hub; cut off from the world, the town is seven miles from the nearest rail station and struggling to find new purpose, drowning in the uncanny presence of its past identity. By 1863, when Dickens wrote this, the great age of the road was definitively in the past (or, at least, until it became the future again in the early twentieth century). But during the 1840s, the railway’s complete national dominance was not a sure thing. Near-historical fiction—the novel-in-history—thus offered many writers a means for exploring alternative modernities by writing out the presence of the railway.

In what follows, I suggest that Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) is preoccupied with the problem of local identity in an era of uneven developments, particularly with regard to the incursion of the railways. For Brontë, like her literary hero Walter Scott, the highly developed system of private contractors that comprised the stage- and mail-coach
network during the first half of the long nineteenth century was a proud emblem of national communication. Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), for instance, opens with a vision of the mail-coach as the symbol of modernity, a networked Britain joining Scotland to her “richer sister” south of the border. “The times have changed,” Scott’s narrator avers, “in nothing more . . . than in the rapid conveyance of intelligence and communication betwixt one part of Scotland and another.” The new speed of the mail-coaches on the major new roads, a result of John Palmer’s innovations in the Royal Mail from 1784 and the Royal Commission on Roads in the Highlands of 1803, meant that in “both countries [Scotland and England] these ancient, slow, and sure modes of conveyance, are now alike unknown; mail-coach races against mail-coach, and high-flyer against high-flyer, through the most remote districts in Britain. And in our village alone, three post-coaches, and four coaches with men armed, and in scarlet cassocks, thunder through the streets each day” (13). In the course of a sentence (and that of a mail-coach journey, carrying the written word by road), two countries, Scotland and England, emerge as a singular “Britain” in which each remote district has its own voice. As Linda Colley informs us, displays of the mail-coaches at jubilees and in annual processions formed a vital part of British patriotism (219–22). Thomas Telford’s efforts to reconstruct the Highland Roads, the Irish Mail route through North Wales, and, as Scott reminds his readers, the roads past Skiddaw in the Lakes, provide a powerful early-nineteenth-century example of how proud localities, semi-autonomous regions, were imaginatively conjoined as “Britain.”

Scarlet-clad Post Office Guards, blowing their horns to ensure turnpike gates were thrown open before their arrival, became a potent symbol of a communicative body politic in the late romantic period. Investment in road improvements through turnpike trusts, in addition to Royal Commissions on roads, opened up the Lakes, North Wales, and the Highlands to tourists as never before during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The flow went both ways, of course, as the systematization of the Royal Mail on such roads brought remote villages into regular national communication through print and post. Written in the 1840s as the railways began to displace this earlier system, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* looks to the stagecoach era of the 1820s, a setting located just far enough in the past to be considered historical. One of the novel’s central investments in the stagecoach is, I argue—here as elsewhere—as a strongly Tory emblem of the British nation.
Radical as Jane’s claims to speak and feel might be from the perspective of liberal narratives of progress and individualism, they are best understood in this Tory context of anti-metropolitan regionalism and preservationism. Such an assertion may seem to run against the grain of the novel’s critical history. While Juliet Barker’s revisionist biography of the Brontës, with its careful exploration of the family’s Tory politics, has informed several recent accounts of their fiction, there remains a persistent tradition of reading Jane Eyre as an exemplary text promoting liberal individualism, with its radical promise and totalizing ambitions. Intellectual history falls short, however, when it comes to nineteenth-century Toryism, reflecting the self-consciously anti-rational, anti-intellectual nature of this political identity while leaving few critical tools at hand to analyze what a Tory self—and, in particular, a Yorkshire Tory self—might look like. Conversely, the rich intellectual resources of nineteenth-century liberalism have provided ample equipment to tackle Jane Eyre’s radical self-assertions; however, these are risky, momentary halts, staging posts in a journey that restores and preserves customary regional community. The stagecoach in Jane Eyre is a communicative vehicle that knits the smallest, most remote places and persons into the nation while preserving place, origin, and distinct identity. It is a resistant Tory mode of inscribing an alternative modernity in the era of progress.

I. Local Communications

He had not imagined that a woman would dare speak so to a man. For me, I felt at home in this sort of discourse. I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female, till I had passed the outworks of conventional reserve, and crossed the threshold of confidence, and won a place by their heart’s very hearthstone. (Jane Eyre 418)

When Jane Eyre confronts St. John Rivers about his love for Rosamond Oliver, she figures her communication as a military assault: storming the “outworks” of reserve, she aims to form an alliance on the domestic intimacy of the hearthstone. Although Rivers does temporarily reveal himself to Jane in the passage that follows, this brief interval of openness belies the statements that Rivers makes about himself and that come to characterize him later in the novel. He has no warm fire within but is cold and hard, “fixed as rock” through and through (418). Such impermeableness clearly contrasts with Jane’s
earlier interchanges with Rochester. In a remarkable passage, Jane insists on her right to speak to Rochester of her love: “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh:—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if we had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal—as we are” (284). In both cases—and there are many more in Jane Eyre—communication is not simply dialogue; it is an aperture and a movement that asserts its power to traverse material constraints in order to stand next to its object. Yet as startling as Jane’s language of equality and individual freedom may be (she is “a free human being with an independent will” [284]), it is authorized by a religious discourse, not the politics of liberal individualism. The text is thick with the awareness of social hierarchies and obligations, the geographical and technological constraints on communication: only in moments of extremity does Jane make her voice heard outside these frames. Even then, she always speaks of and with a sense of social and geographical place—never, as we shall see, communicating as a disembodied liberal subject.

Richard Menke has recently suggested that the meaning of the term “communication” was in the process of shifting when Brontë’s novel took shape (71–73). According to Menke, the most common understanding of communication in the early 1840s was that of a means to proximity: the roads, rails, and canals that brought people and objects together. The rise of the electric telegraph from the late 1840s “decisively decoupled data transmission from transportation, relieving the circulation of messages from the constraints of physical movement” (72). Menke’s reading of 1840s realism—and Brontë’s Jane Eyre—in conjunction with the electric telegraph is careful and convincing, but here I want to explore communication and locomotion in the novel in relation to its uses of the near past rather than its visions of the near future. If, as Menke suggests, the new era of the electric telegraph was about to abolish distance and the materiality of communication, then Jane Eyre is preoccupied with that materiality, the distance to be traversed. It preserves a local landscape on the verge of obliteration by speed.

The means of communication in Brontë’s novel—stagecoaches, post offices, letters, and the “mystic work of nature” that carries Rochester’s voice to Jane at Morton—are embedded in history and the rootedness of communication and contiguity. In one of the few works on Tory ideology in the nineteenth century, Nigel Everett
indicates the centrality of localized rural landscape to the anti-modern strain of Romanticism. For Robert Southey, to whom the aspirant writer Brontë wrote for advice in 1837, local attachment was a means of maintaining a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility as the industrial era gradually eroded such features in urban life (Everett 171). On the cusp of a new era of movement and communication, *Jane Eyre*, as a historical novel of the 1820s, looks back to networks of mobility that sustained such romantic nationalism in which the individual on the margins could be the symbol of collective identity.

As the new railway lines patchily began to join the industrial towns of England during the 1830s and 1840s, under the haphazard direction of private enterprise, earlier means of communication continued to coexist with the railway. The stage- and mail-coach system still carried passengers, parcels, news, and post in those areas without rail communication. It was this transport system that made the most significant difference to the mobility and economies of early-nineteenth-century Britain, despite the opening of the first passenger railway in 1825 and widespread steam navigation by water (Austen 15–20). John Palmer’s revolutionary proposal in 1784 to contract out the Royal Mail to the proprietors of the new, fast stagecoaches had ushered in four decades of what was then dizzyingly fast road travel for letters, print, and persons alike. The Post Office supported the formation of local turnpike trusts to gather tolls and maintain improved roads, and fueled the boom years of local road speculation in the mid-1820s (Ransom 103). In *Our Village* (1832), Mary Russell Mitford foreshadows the erasure of space Schivelbusch attributes to the railways by suggesting that these new “macadamised roads . . . lately introduced [in the 1820s], have so abridged, I had well might said annihilated, distances in this fair island, that what used to be judged as a journey is now a drive” (Schivelbusch 13; Mitford 288). Even Mitford’s archetypal English provincial village is connected to the whole of “this fair island” by the new roads: it is non-metropolitan but firmly national in its communications.

The multispeed nation of the mid-nineteenth century falls into a familiar pattern in the history of technology and new media. Nathan Rosenberg notes how new innovations can only be imagined as feeders of and supplements to existing technological systems “rather than as new systems that would largely displace the old ones” (4): “Contemporary systems exercise a powerful influence in shaping the reaction to
technological novelty. New technologies are usually defined as if they were to perform a role within the existing system” (221). A new technology like the railway does not displace the old system, but is imagined as an addition to it. The oddity of such interface, and the unreliability in its early forms, makes its potential as a replacement system seem improbable. Rosenberg reminds us of the tenuous nature of the ascriptions of obsolescence to old, but still perfectly functional, systems that occur when new forms are introduced. David Bolter and Richard Grusin have also examined how new forms of communication inscribe a self-conscious awareness of the new medium itself while tending only to remediate past strategies of representation. In a more retrospective vein, I suggest here that the stage- and mail-coach system does not become obsolete on the arrival of the railways; rather, its affective content is heightened, underscored by the experience and coexistence of alternate modes of mobility and communication within the old system.

For those living far from London and the major industrial cities between which the early railway lines communicated, connecting to a fast day- or mail-coach remained the best way to travel through the 1840s. In 1844, when Charlotte Brontë visited her friend Ellen Nussey in Birstall, she traveled as a passenger on the mail-coach between Keighley and Bradford, then changed to the Dewsbury stagecoach. While Branwell Brontë worked as a clerk on the new railway line that crossed the Pennines a considerable way south of Haworth from 1840 to 1842, and Charlotte took her first train journey (from Leeds to York) in 1839, it was not until 1847 that the Leeds–Bradford Railway extended to Keighley, some three and a half miles from Haworth (Barker 315–16; 345–48). In August of that year, Brontë sent the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* to her prospective publishers, Smith and Elder, by rail, and her cover note conveys her lack of certainty in this unsystematic mode of transport. Dismayed to find that the temporary shed that served for a station in Keighley was not equipped to receive prepayment for parcels, Brontë reassured her London publishers that she would “immediately transmit” the “amount charged on delivery” in the form of “postage stamps” once informed of what she owed (Smith 560). The postage stamps, introduced a mere seven years earlier, had regularized payment for the existing national postal network. The railway, however, was far from being the rationalizing system of abstract space and time it was made to seem from the mid-nineteenth century onward. As the Brontë sisters learned after investing their only funds
in the shaky stocks of the railway boom, the railway was an unstable and uneven venture altogether.

From London (or perhaps more importantly, given Elizabeth Gaskell’s influence, from Manchester), Brontë’s village might seem to lag behind on the route to progress. But horse-drawn carrier’s carts nevertheless underpinned a growing industrial economy around Haworth throughout the 1840s, and Royal Mail coaches would have carried Brontë’s correspondence to and from Keighley. In the first volume of his History of England (1849), Thomas Babington Macaulay argued that “every improvement of the means of locomotion benefits mankind morally and intellectually as well as materially, and not only facilitates the interchange of the various productions of nature and art, but tends to remove national and provincial antipathies, and to bind together all the branches of the great human family” (290). Only the alphabet and the printing press exceeded the civilizing power of “those inventions which abridge distance”; chief among these was the railway.

To those living well off the rails in the 1840s—especially those high Tory anti-Whig Brontës—the idea of progress and the meaning of national communication had a rather different inflection. To be firmly embedded in the local did not mean that one was cut off from communication with the nation. The increasingly rapid circulation of print by the mail-coach system in the first three decades of the nineteenth century had brought Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine and the novels of Walter Scott, for example, within reach of readers in Haworth. Both of these publications, as Heather Glen and James Buzard have indicated, are central to Brontë’s understanding of nation and identity (Glen 4–10; Buzard 172–75). Both inform an anti-Whiggish notion of nation, progress, and communication in Jane Eyre.

In the years that followed the publication of Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857), the literary tourist trail to Haworth seemed to consecrate the Brontës and their novels as epitomes of the local. Even the earliest metropolitan reviewers identified the novels—particularly Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights— with a sense of place alternative to that of the civilized nation, a region of uncultivated wilds. Part of the pleasure of reading nineteenth-century realist novels is their ability to evoke a sense of place that is different from the reader’s own yet internally coherent. The frisson of literary tourism in the nineteenth century was that one could get out there and see where it happened: the inventions of Walter Scott’s Scotland and the lakes of the Lake
Poets are the chief examples here. (Charlotte Brontë was no exception to this passion for literary place, traveling to Peveril Castle, the setting of Scott’s *Peveril of the Peak* [1823], during her visit to Hathersage in 1845 [Barker 453].) This aura of locality as authenticating device for the realist text, however, was predicated on the mobility in and of the novel and its readers. The specificity of a locale becomes accessible and desirable in a modernity characterized by displacement and motion.¹¹

The nineteenth-century realist novel—that of the 1840s and 1850s might serve as an archetype here—was also a material object that circulated internationally thanks to emigration and popular mobility. The novels’ plots are driven by the geographical movements of heroes and heroines, unexpected letters and legacies, and benefactors turning up from distant places. And yet, as Josephine McDonagh points out, such literature in an age of migration is often surprisingly resistant to figuring mobility between places in its pages. Writing of George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861), McDonagh argues that mobility is constantly reabsorbed “into an account of place—its customs, its folklore, its rituals”—as Eliot reverses the pattern of nineteenth-century migration to return Silas from the industrial town to the heart of rural Raveloe (56). In this sense we can see Eliot staging a reversal of the historical narrative of the mid-nineteenth century popularized by Raymond Williams, in which the 1840s witness the painful shift in balance from rural to urban, stasis to movement, then to now.¹² Williams’s memorable cultural analysis of this decade links social and economic instability to the “archetype of the dispossessed” orphan and governess in the fiction of the time (68). *Jane Eyre* carries the “social and personal reality” of the “enduring experience” of the social system of the industrial era: “Man [sic] alone, afraid, a victim” (68).

But close attention to mobility—communication and locomotion—reveals a rather different reading of *Jane Eyre*. Motion might in itself have disorienting moments of dispossession and isolation, but road communication imagines the capillary flows that connect the local to the nation, the individual to unknown but friendly others.¹³ The stagecoach imaginary offers an alternative modernity to the railway by enhancing the importance of local place and localized selves within the nation. *Jane Eyre* returns its protagonist to her rightful place amid the middling rural gentry, dispensing a customary five pound note to the servants at Ferndean on her marriage. (The gesture of largesse and the literal forelock tugging that follows indicate how Jane
Inscribing Englishness in Adèle, the novel constructs new bonds of obligation and gratitude beyond blood ties. This journey from a deracinated, mobile individual to a figure intimately bound into a system of local obligations is one inseparable from post and road and a Tory view of national communication.

In the furious campaigning outside Parliament regarding the introduction of Rowland Hill’s uniform Penny Post in 1840, a petition by the Mercantile Committee on Postage trumpeted a statement made by the Tory peer, Lord Ashburton, in speaking to the Commons Committee on the subject:

Postage is one of the worst of our Taxes; it is in fact, taxing the conversation of people who live at a distance from each other. The communication of letters by persons living at a distance is the same as a communication by word of mouth between persons living in the same town. (Mercantile)

In contrast to the largely Benthamite and Utilitarian analysis of the advantages of the Penny Post offered by Rowland Hill, Ashburton underscores a Tory idea of communication (Daunton 15). Cheap and effective postage is needed, not to diffuse useful knowledge or advance the free exchange of mercantile information, but to supplement the loss of proximity and local belonging in modernity, construct bonds of obligation and attachment, and hold together an increasingly fractured set of interests between the middle and upper classes, the urban and the rural.

II. Getting to Whitcross

If anything marks *Jane Eyre* as a novel eager to represent the lively presence of communications of the recent past, it is Jane’s flight from Thornfield the morning after her abortive wedding to Rochester. This portion of the narrative has tended to lie at the center of readings of the assertive individualism of the novel and its extraordinary heroine. It may seem odd to claim, then, that Jane Eyre is in these passages a local, Tory, “Yorkshire soul” rather than an epitome of the global liberal will to self and all its attendant imperial ambitions (*Shirley* 8). But the Yorkshire woman—as exemplified in *Shirley* (1849) by the landlady Mrs. Gale—is an identity as marked as that of the Irish curate Mr. Malone. We learn two things about Mrs. Gale in as many pages of
Shirley: first, that she has a classic Tory yearning for latter days of good manners and less high learning; second, that Malone’s imperative “Cut it woman” when offered bread makes her want to slice him up as well: Mrs. Gale’s “Yorkshire soul revolted absolutely from his manner of command” (Shirley 8). The (still legendary) pride, prudence, and undeferential nature of Yorkshire Toryism explicit in Shirley is muted yet persistently present in Jane Eyre. There, the heroine is convinced of the social place from which she is entitled to speak her mind, but she must make an unexpected break in her journey to knit herself back into a local community that can make that identity visible to all.

The first chapter of volume three ends with the heroine striking across the fields in the early dawn, heading for “a road which stretched in the contrary direction to Millcote; a road I had never travelled, but often noticed, and wondered where it led” (360). Resting under a hedge, Jane hears a coach:

I stood up and lifted my hand; it stopped. I asked where it was going; the driver named a place a long way off, and where I was sure Mr. Rochester had no connexions. I asked for what sum he would take me there; he said thirty shillings; I answered I had but twenty; well, he would try to make it do. He further gave me leave to get into the inside, as the vehicle was empty: I entered, was shut in, and it rolled on its way. (361)

Two days later, her twenty shillings have taken Jane as far as Whitcross, “no town, nor even a hamlet; . . . but a stone pillar set up where four roads meet.” She stands “absolutely destitute” on the “great moors,” having left her parcel of belongings in the coach (362). After a night sleeping in the heather, guarded by the “universal mother, nature,” Jane stumbles the next morning down a road leading to the hamlet of Morton, where in due course she discovers that her benefactors Diana, Mary, and St. John Rivers are in fact her cousins.

At the level of plot, this crucial turning point in the novel is unimaginable by train. A train wouldn’t stop at a random point on its route at the wave of a hand; not even the smallest train station would be as isolated as Whitcross, and buying a ticket, getting on, and getting off would involve a whole set of exchanges inconsistent with the dramatic stripping-off of society that this journey portrays. The railway station was always somewhere where one was seen: think of Margaret Hale finding anonymity impossible even at the suburban station she uses to smuggle her brother Frederick out of Milton Northern in Gaskell’s North and
South (1854–55). The flexible imagining of the stagecoach, on the other hand, offered a network of relative places—places like Whitcross, existing only as distances from “well-known” locales rather than in their own right.¹⁵ The “nearest town” pointed to by the Whitcross marker is, “according to the inscription, distant ten miles; the farthest, above twenty.” It is from this information that Jane Eyre works out in which “north-midland shire” she has arrived (362).

Schivelbusch indicates the railroad’s tendency to destroy “the space between points . . . in-between space or travel space, which it was possible to ‘savour’” using horse-drawn transport. This destruction of such “in-between” spaces, he argues, leads to the collision of the departure and destination points: “they lose their old sense of local identity, which used to be determined by the spaces between them” (45). While this account of the erasure of local identity clearly conveys an important aspect of the dislocation of the railway era, the concept of two fixed points and a blank “in-between” space fails to configure how stage- and mail-coach routes were punctuated by a constellation of halts and connecting nodes, all strung out as a series of relative, local places on nationally configured routes.

Relative places like these, gaining a national identity as vehicular stopping places, are a crucial feature of the stage- and mail-coach era. The coaching guide Cary’s New Itinerary, revised and republished regularly between 1798–1828, made public the documentation of the “great roads” of Britain, drawn up by John Cary, Surveyor of Roads to the General Post Office, as part of Palmer’s transformation of the British postal system (329–30). The major routes from London and the chief crossroads were measured out in stages, providing a distance from the General Post Office in the City of London and between each marker. As seen in figure 1 from Cary’s New Itinerary, relative places spring into being as markers of distance on the coach routes following this itinerary. Unlike villages fixed on a map as groups of dwellings, or stops on a railway, these locations are transformed from the strictly local to the national thanks to a particular transport system; they gain meaning through mobility rather than stasis. Look closely at the right hand column, for instance, and Emmanuel Height (between Illingworth and Keighley) or Cross Hills (further along toward Skipton) become relative places on the coach route from Halifax to Kendal. Neither place features on current road atlases, our equivalent guides for traveling long-distance. These might just be markers on the moor,
**Fig. 1:** John Cary, *Cary's New Itinerary; or an accurate delineation of the great roads, both direct and cross, throughout England and Wales with many of the principle road of Scotland from an actual admeasurement made by command of his Majesty's Postmaster General for official purposes under the direction and inspection of Thomas Hasket esq. surveyors and Superintendent of the Mail Coaches. By John Cary, surveyor of the Roads to the General Post Office. (London: John Cary, 1798). British Library Shelfmark 290.a.23. P. 338. Reproduced from Thompson Gale Eighteenth-Century Collections Online by kind permission of the British Library.
or isolated chapels at a road junction, but they become recorded places relative to the national flows of mail and persons, places where the coaches might stop to take up passengers and mail bags from outlying villages. A tiny local place becomes integral to a national network.

While some places only came into being as a stop, existing small settlements gained considerable economic and social advantage from being on a major coaching route. Look further down Cary’s Itinerary, for instance, and there Cowan Bridge is listed as one of the last stops before Kendal on this route. Cowan Bridge, a little hamlet abutting the Kendal turnpike road, was the site of the Reverend Carus Wilson’s Clergy Daughters’ School, attended by Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë from 1824 to 1825. Exposed and relatively distant from any large settlement as it was, it would be wrong to read this place as in any sense isolated from communications with the wider world: the school’s location on a good coach road no doubt made it a more attractive proposition to impoverished clergy unable to afford private coach hire.\[16\] Patrick Brontë chose to take the cheaper daily Leeds-Kendal coach from Keighley, rather than the London to Kendal Mail, when taking Maria and Elizabeth to Cowan Bridge in July 1824. That he had the choice suggests the busy flows on the turnpike road outside the entrance to the school (Barker 128).

Something of this sense of visible communications just within reach permeates Brontë’s account of Lowood Institution in Jane Eyre. To get to Mr. Brocklehurst’s school, Jane is loaded by Bessie onto the coach that passes the lodge at Gateshead at “six a.m.” The presence of the guard who casually replies “Ay, ay!” to Bessie’s instructions to take care of his passenger suggests it is a mail-coach in which Jane is “whirled [fifty miles] away to unknown, and, as [she] then deemed, remote and mysterious regions” (51). Unlike Jane Eyre’s adult travels, in this instance Brontë details the effects of the journey itself: the young Jane wanders round a coaching inn, terrified at the prospect of being kidnapped; the countryside changes from “great grey hills” to “a valley dark with wood” with “a wild wind rushing amongst the trees,” and then she is dropped at Lowood’s door (52). Eight years later, looking at this road and remembering her mail-coach journey fuels Jane’s desire for “liberty” or “at least a new servitude”: she might neither have received a letter or visit nor left Lowood in eight years, but a walk up that road to the nearest post office puts her in communication with the nation thanks to an advert in the —shire Herald
(99, 101). Most who seek new situations “apply to friends, I suppose: I have no friends”: the resource for those “who must look about for themselves and be their own helpers” is, in an echo of Lord Ashburton’s comments, communication by the postal network rather than personal relations (100).

This determinedly first-person Jane Eyre, the “I” who insists on making her way through life despite her lack of family, friends, beauty, and wealth, moves from isolation to communication through the mail. She posts her advert; she walks to Hay to post a letter for Mrs. Fairfax, meeting Mr. Rochester for the first time on the way; she writes to her uncle in Madeira of her forthcoming marriage, setting in motion the discovery of her cousins; she writes twice to Mrs. Fairfax from Moor House for information regarding Rochester. The novel closes with a letter from St. John Rivers in India, which, as Heather Glen suggests, takes on the mantle of the singular, first-person self now that Jane is in the happy “we” with Rochester. For many years it has been a critical commonplace that Jane Eyre is a supreme example of nineteenth-century narratives of resourceful self-help. From Raymond Williams’s criticism of the insistent “first-person stress” of Brontë’s works (qtd. in Glen 32) to Elaine Freedgood’s recent analysis of Jane Eyre as a would-be rebel slave turned master of the sadistic souvenirs of empire (50), the power of that unexpectedly commanding “I” has been as troubling as it is compelling. But that “I,” even, or especially, at moments of extreme isolation or threat, is always on the move to communicate with another. When Jane crosses the outworks of St. John Rivers’s reserve it is to discuss why he does not marry the woman he loves and remain in Morton, uniting the historical rank of his family in the area with the new industrial wealth of Mr. Oliver for the benefit of all, and becoming an exemplar of the modern Tory union of rural squires and new urbanizing masters, of Church and the village State. Rivers rejects this path in favor of pursuing his individual “cold, hard” ambition and, according to Jane, lays “his genius out to wither . . . under a tropical sun” (419, 416). This very act of trying to bind the ambitious individualist back into local customary culture inadvertently discloses the scrap of writing that is to embed Jane herself firmly back into a secure place in the world that is the village. Rivers tears Jane’s true signature off the scrap paper on which she has been sketching Rosamond Oliver, taking hold of her self and ensuring that she is recuperated into a world of affective ties and obligations.
Stagecoach journeys always carry a promise and a threat to this self in *Jane Eyre*. While moving onward holds out hope for a communal future, each road journey Jane takes risks an absolute loss of self-possession. From that first fear of kidnapping in the coaching inn on the way to Lowood to the weird moment where Jane hears of herself as the bewitching little governess bringing ruin to Rochester from the landlord of the Rochester Arms, who recounts what he knows of the village gossip, journeys by stage threaten Jane’s control over herself and her story (475). On three separate occasions Brontë adds to this sense of a threatened loss by collapsing the distance between here and there, now and then. Waiting at the George Inn at Millcote for her guide to Thornfield after leaving Lowood brings a sudden telescoping of distance between the two Janes, narrator and character. The narrator’s address to the reader appears to highlight the fictional nature of what she is reading: “A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the George Inn at Millcote” (108). The narrative then shifts to the present tense to paint a scene “visible to you by the light of an oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling”: “I am warming away the numbness and chill contracted by sixteen hours’ exposure to the rawness of an October day: I left Lowton at four o’clock p.m., and the Millcote town clock is now just striking eight” (108).

This direct address on the nature of the novel in conjunction with a description of the coaching inn is reminiscent of Henry Fielding’s equation of novels and stagecoach journeys in both *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). As *Tom Jones* reaches its “final stage,” the implied author suggests that the correct relation between his readers and himself is that of “fellow travellers in a stage-coach” (*Tom Jones* 813). Fielding here recapitulates the analogy he made first in *Joseph Andrews*, where he recommends that the “spaces between our chapters may be looked upon as an inn or resting-place ... to be regarded as those stages, where, in a long journey, the traveller stays some time to repose himself, and consider of what he hath seen in the parts he hath already passed through” (99). This scene may be an arch allusion to the eighteenth-century picaresque and its signature travels by stagecoach and to and from inns. Whether the scene is consciously intertextual or not, the sudden collapse of distance and time is disorienting. The implied reader becomes a fellow passenger, warming herself at the George Inn, feeling Jane’s anxiety as she is forced to wait like a
stagecoach parcel, awaiting collection by the servant of Thornfield of whom there is no sign.

The second instance in which a coach journey coincides with a sudden shift to the present tense occurs on Jane’s return from her aunt’s deathbed in Gateshead. Leaving the stagecoach at Millcote, Jane walks to Thornfield from the George Inn by the old road through the meadows, and the narrative abruptly shifts into a hyper-lucid moment-by-moment account of the countryside: “I pass a tall briar, shooting leafy and flowery branches across the path; I see the narrow stile with stone steps; and I see—Mr. Rochester sitting there” (274). The third occasion where this collapse of time and space accompanies a journey is Jane’s arrival at Whitcross:

Two days are passed. It is a summer evening. . . . I wish no eye to see me now: strangers would wonder what I am doing, lingering here at the sign-post, evidently objectless and lost. I might be questioned: I could give no answer but what would sound incredible, and excite suspicion. Not a tie holds me to human society at this moment. . . . I have no relative but the universal mother, nature. (362)

The most obvious textual effect of shifts in tense is a dramatization of emotional intensity: in each, the passions of youth disrupt mature narrative control, making certain moments able to be eternally relived. But these instances also mark out how each journey—or better, each staged arrival—is a movement that erases time in order to communicate with unknown others, often the novel’s readers.17 It is they (or us) who are so carefully addressed by the narrator, not the readers of Jane’s advert in the —shire Herald. We are the recipients of a letter written on the spot, not simply the readers of narratives purchased from the bookseller.

Many of the novel’s readers treat Jane’s arrival at Whitcross as a crystallization of her dizzying negative freedom. On first appearance, Whitcross seems to stand in for Jane Eyre’s own isolation, her exile from human community; it is tempting to read it, as others have done, as a sort of non-place, reflecting the tradition of burying outcasts and suicides at such spots (Buzard 201). As a narrative juncture, Jane’s halt at a crossroads also risks symbolic overload. Yet if we look closely at its continued presence in the novel’s third volume, we find that Whitcross is recuperated as a realist marker of relative place—of how nothing and no one is ever fully cut off from the relational flows of the nation, despite an apparent lack of physical connection, rails or wires, blood or mutual obligation. That Jane’s saviors at Moor House turn
out to be her cousins tells her that no person or place is ever truly without community, communication, and customary culture. She is “a human being, and ha[s] a human being’s wants” that drive her again and again to seek out life in Morton in the face of humiliation by her social inferiors. The claim that she has no relative but Mother Nature is as dangerous for her self-possession as is the passion driving her to run across the fields to Rochester from Millcote (364). True communication always requires two self-possessed subjects occupying distinct places from which they speak, not a disembodied merging of self.

As the third volume of the novel progresses, Whitcross becomes the connection that relates the village of Morton to the nation and the empire. Brontë carefully keeps the place in view. It is at Whitcross that Diana and Mary leave the stagecoach for the jolting gig ride that returns them to the restored Moor House and their newfound cousin Jane (439). St. John Rivers walks to Whitcross to catch the coach that begins his Indian journey (468). An hour after leaving Moor House, Jane herself stands at the foot of Whitcross, beckoning to the very “same vehicle whence, a year ago, I had alighted one summer evening on this very spot” in order to return to Thornfield (470).

This staging of journeys in Jane Eyre dramatizes the movement of place and self from isolation on the margins to communication with the nation. Every locality, however remote from the metropolis, can communicate with it without losing its identity; even the smallest and plainest of governesses can make herself heard to distant others without losing herself, however much the communication may put that self at risk. When Rochester tells Jane of his experience of their “mystic communication,” his account registers a voice speaking from a particular locality:

I’ll tell you, if I can, the idea, the picture these words opened to my mind: yet it is difficult to express what I want to express. Ferndean is buried, as you see, in a heavy wood, where sound falls dull and dies unreverberating. “Where are you?” seemed spoken amongst mountains; for I heard a hill-sent echo repeat the words. (496)

This communication is not that of the abstracting force of the technological revolution that was to impose grid lines on the nation and eliminate place in favor of speed. The alternative modernity of this “work of nature” brings two distinct localities into dialog while providing a picture of that place of origin to distant others. Stagecoach communication does not result in the erosion of local identity, but renders the
vivid color of that relative place to the minds of its recipients. It is no coincidence that when George Eliot’s “imagination does a little Toryism by the sly” in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) it yields a “picture” of rural life in the 1820s rather than the “diagrams, plans, elevations, and sections” of modern “conservative reforming intellect” (5), nor that the stagecoach forms the opening trope of her retrospective rejection of the democratic tendencies of the 1860s in *Felix Holt* (1866). Brontë’s communications are ingrained in a wider Tory concept of the nation in which proximity, interest, custom, and mutual obligation defend against the abstractions of individualism and class.

**III. Going off the Rails**

Carrying all this freight of political affect is a material history of transport that marked and reshaped the landscape and the livelihoods of whole villages and towns. But rail communication in the 1840s was a fairly prosaic form of transport to Brontë. The actual journey that she took to Hathersage, in the Derbyshire Peak District—the inspiration for Morton in *Jane Eyre*—is fairly indicative of this. In early July 1845 Brontë caught the train from Leeds to Sheffield and was probably collected in a gig that took her the remaining eight miles to the vicarage at Hathersage, where her friend Ellen Nussey was preparing a home for her brother, Henry, and his new wife. On the return journey following the same route (improbable as it sounds and contrary to Schivelbusch’s account of the new railway carriage etiquette [80]), Brontë struck up a conversation with a gentleman in the railway carriage, whom she disconcerted by guessing from his accent that he was a Frenchman who had spent most of his life in Germany (Smith 412).

Hathersage had been on a daily coach route from Sheffield to Manchester in the 1830s, but by the time of Brontë’s visit, public communication with Sheffield, according to local directories, was limited to an omnibus every Tuesday and Saturday (although Brontë had been planning, on Nussey’s advice, to catch an unlisted Thursday omnibus) (Bagshaw 511). A few miles north of Hathersage, one of the great speculative turnpike roads of the 1820s ran across the moors from Sheffield, past the old drover’s milestone at Moscar Cross (identified by local historians and scholars as the “real” Whitcross), to Manchester via Glossop.

What is now known as the Snake Pass (A57) through the Derbyshire Peak District was the innovation of the Sixth Duke of
Devonshire, William George Spencer Cavendish. Cavendish, who showed continued interest in technical innovation by providing patronage for Joseph Paxton on his Chatsworth estate from 1823, seems to have been instrumental in forming the Sheffield and Glossop Road Bill, enacted in 1818, and in the financing of the subsequent turnpike trust. The new road, in particular the junction to Moscar House in Hathersage parish, it was claimed,

would open a direct and easy communication with a fertile District of Country, now only accessible by circuitous, rugged, narrow, and hilly Lanes and Roads; would considerably shorten the distance between Sheffield and Glossop...; would facilitate the Carriage of various vegetable and mineral Productions, and the Interchange of Merchandise between the said Two Places and the neighbouring Country. (58 Geo.)

The trustees accordingly raised the money to employ Thomas Telford to engineer one of the most spectacular roads in Britain from moorland tracks, while Cavendish financed the building of the Ashopton Inn and posting house on the road, to tempt commercial stage- and mail-coach contractors to the new route (Glover 50). By 1827 the road was earning £975 a year over and above the cost of collecting fees at the seven toll houses along the route, though the steep fee of ninepence per horse-drawn vehicle had been reduced to the more moderate sixpence that year (Derby Mercury).

Brand new in 1821 and offering the promise of development to the remote peak valleys as the new route of the Manchester mail, a newly completed railway line, by the time of Brontë’s visit, had emptied the road of much of its traffic. Writing of the 1820s in the 1840s, Brontë could depict communication in which relative places and relative selves all took part in structuring the flexible national networks of the early century. By the early 1840s the progressive narrative of the railway age, on the other hand, risked making Hathersage, like Haworth, a wilderness off the map for those unable to afford private transport, annihilating local place and time in the quest for unified speed. The longstanding Tory investment in local place and rural regional identity became mere provincialism—a trait of Brontë’s to be derided by Virginia Woolf and other metropolitan liberal modernists—rather than a means for speaking of the nation.

Royal Holloway, University of London
NOTES

1See, among others, Daly; Headrick; Henkin; Kreilkamp; and Menke.

2For an account of nostalgia in the novel as a means to contain and control the past and memory—productively at odds with my reading of mid-nineteenth-century fiction—see Dames.

3Telford suggests that improvements in the Irish Mail routes were a direct result of the complaints of the Irish Members of Parliament traveling regularly to Westminster after the Act of Union in 1800. See Rickman 204.

4Glen draws on the Brontës' Tory reading material; Parrinder reads Brontë in the tradition of “Tory Daughters.” Notable accounts framing the novel in terms of liberal individualism include Freedgood; Spivak; and Williams. Both Buzard and Kaplan explore the limitations of such readings.

5See also the repeated rock imagery in Chapter 8 of the third volume when Rivers proposes to Jane: “It is the Rock of Ages I ask you to lean on; do not doubt that it will bear your human weakness” (448); Jane, conversely, thinks he “has no more of a husband’s heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock, down which the stream is foaming in yonder gorge” (450).

6The exchange echoes 1 Corinthians 13 with its preoccupation with love and imperfect earthly vision. Thanks to Adam Roberts for bringing this to my attention.

7The OED suggests a slightly different history of these changing inflections, taking as the first nineteenth-century definition an example drawn from Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights (1847): “concr. A means of communicating; a channel, line of connexion, connecting passage or opening. Hence door of communication.”

8For an illuminating discussion of this act of communication in relation to nation and locality, see Buzard 165.

9Elements of the postal system were first entrusted to rail in 1830. Although the last London-based mail-coach (Norwich to Newmarket) was replaced by train in 1846, cross posts (those between other towns and not originating in London) and parts of more rural routes—such as the last stretch of the Falmouth packet mail—still relied on horse-drawn transportation (Farrugia and Gammon 24).

10Fifty-nine new turnpike trusts were formed between 1824–26.

11See Plotz on the “portability” of the novel’s evocation of locale and other affective commodities sent out to the Empire: “The more successful a text is at rendering place palpable, the more it delocalizes the locale on which the representation is founded” (5).

12My thanks to Josephine McDonagh for an illuminating discussion of this point at the “Thinking Mobility in the Nineteenth Century” Institute of English Studies, University of London, Nineteenth-Century Research Seminar, 4 Oct. 2008.

13Franco Moretti has stressed how the “village stories” of the 1820s, such as Mitford’s Our Village, refuse to cede local identity and homeland to national centralization. As in later regional stories, including Thomas Hardy’s Wessex novels, these village tales are the antithesis of the provincial novel, which defines the province as inferior to the national capital. Brontë’s work falls under the heading of the regional novel somewhat before its moment of glory in literary history (Moretti 50–53).
Thanks to Ella Dzelzainis for her instructive discussion of Toryism in Shirley and elsewhere; see also Briggs.

McDonagh’s discussion of relative place in Mitford’s Our Village informs my analysis here.

The tenth edition of Cary’s Itinerary in 1828 lists the Clergy Daughter School as one of the notable features of Cowan Bridge.

My thanks to the anonymous reader at VS for drawing the significance of the halt to my attention.

While the railways are renowned for introducing standard time, the timepieces carried by the Royal Mail coach guards were adjusted to gain or lose time on journeys from London to match local variants in timekeeping. Mail-coach time-bills required guards to fill in the time shown both on their timepieces and on local clocks on reaching each major stop on the route. See, for instance, Royal Mail Archives POST 10/7.

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58 Geo. III, xxxv (8 May 1818). “An Act for making and maintaining a Road from the Town of Sheffield in the County of York, to join the Marple Bridge Road, in the Parish of Glossop, in the County of Derby, with a Branch to Mortimer’s Road, in the Parish of Hathersage, in the said County of Derby.”


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