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Paper Proposal: ChLA 2019 "Empathy"

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Hidden among the Birds:

Thomas Bewick's Engravings and an Education in Empathy

"Each picture told a story: mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting. . . with Bewick on my knee, I was then happy" –
Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

Jane Eyre, suffering from familial abuse and social exclusion, turns for comfort to the tiny vignettes, the wood engravings of rural scenes, tucked as tailpieces at the chapter ends of Thomas Bewick's two volume *History of British Birds* (1797, 1804). *Jane Eyre* is not a children's book and neither is Bewick's natural history, but Bronte's novel gives us evidence that Bewick's expensive volumes had the potential to entertain, soothe, and even save the emotional lives of neglected children. Examining Bewick's black and white vignettes, this paper recovers for children's literature the artwork and impact of an eighteenth-century craftsman known for his revolutionary political sympathies. In so doing, it throws into question assumptions about relations between aesthetics, representation, and empathy, arguing that the "children's Bewick" of the vignettes is the revolutionary Bewick celebrated by print historians: the man whose application of the steel engraver's tools to the end grain of the wood engraver's block made cheap

illustrated books possible and with them, the politics of democracy. I further argue that this children's Bewick advances an education in empathy, an education available *because of*, not despite, its submersion within the "adult's Bewick," its frightening revolutionary potential hidden among the birds.