

FOUR

Everyday Life in Anne Brontë



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The Brontës' novels are justly famous for their middles. Nelly Dean's narration in the middle of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847); the Thornfield episode, flanked by Lowood and Marsh End, in the middle of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)—both serve as keystones to the novels' elaborate architecture. And so, too, does the diary that makes up the middle of Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). More typically, however, the middles of Anne Brontë's novels differ from those of her sisters. While theirs display formal mastery, hers more often offer a space for formal experimentation. In the middle chapters of *Agnes Grey* (1847), indeed even in the middle of *Tenant's* inset diary, we can see Anne Brontë experimenting to find forms capable of containing everyday life.

The everyday is not a topic we associate with the Brontës, who are better known for embracing the extreme, for depicting rioting laborers and tortured birds, *delirium tremens* and violent assaults, ghosts that haunt the Yorkshire moors, nuns that haunt Belgian schools, and the echoing call of Rochester for Jane. But for the Brontës, at least for Charlotte and Anne Brontë, the ordinary was an important subject as well. Charlotte Brontë was quite explicit about this. In the opening pages of her apprentice novel, *The Professor* (1846; 1857), she announced her commitment to depicting persons who are "plain and homely" and events that are "not exciting, and above all, not marvelous."¹

should have an affinity because work, which she conceives of as the making and repairing of the world, parallels the imaginative world-making entailed by novel-writing. And yet, Scarry emphasizes, work nonetheless resists being depicted in novels; indeed, it is, she shows, "in some fundamental ways . . . very difficult to represent."³ We can read the middle of *Agnes Grey* in the light of Scarry's account, which I'll discuss more fully below, but it's also possible to read the novel, I'll be arguing, as offering its own account of why work is so difficult to depict, one that elaborates on Scarry's in interesting ways. To be sure, Anne Brontë is a novelist, not a theorist, but her views can be inferred from her own efforts at depiction—particularly from those efforts that failed. For Brontë, work is not, as it is for Scarry, inherently difficult to depict; rather, it becomes difficult to depict in certain social and literary contexts. In the middle of *Agnes Grey*, Brontë explores those contexts, discovering quite specific impediments to depicting work.

The first impediment that Anne Brontë uncovers is social: there are limits on what workers may properly say. Some workers are not permitted to speak at all, and their silence leads insensitive observers to presume that they have no consciousness, a presumption that both Charlotte and Anne Brontë condemn. In *Shirley*, for instance, the workers to whom the factory owner does not deign to speak appear to him to be indistinguishable from the "machines" with which they work.⁴ And in *The Professor*, a clerk is not permitted to ask for holiday or admit that he is tired, and his consequent lack of protest against the conditions of his labor leads an observer to conclude that he is nothing but an "automaton" (*Professor* 67). The word returns in *Agnes Grey* when a thoughtless woman speaks indiscreetly in front of her servants, taking their enforced silence as proof that they are "mere automatons" (*AG* 180).

But Anne Brontë goes farther than Charlotte Brontë in analyzing the limits on workers' speech. She recognizes that in addition to those workers, such as servants or factory hands, who are required to be entirely silent, are others, such as governesses, who are required to speak in certain ways. As a governess, Agnes is limited in what she may say *about* her students, as when her mother warns her not to discuss their faults with their parents and her first employer warns her not to discuss their faults with anyone else. And she is also limited in what she may say *to* her students, as when her second employer reminds her that a governess may not speak as frankly to her charges as a mother may do. More surprisingly, her status as a worker also limits what she might say even when she is at leisure. She notes, with considerable bitterness, that guests of her employers never condescend to speak with her, and she notes as well that she is never drawn into conversation by the young men and women with whom she walks to church. And so her status as a governess deprives her of a

gentlewoman's right to engage in conversation. (Charlotte Brontë would make a similar observation in *Villette*, when a teacher complains of being paid no more attention in company than "unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner's work, and carpets of no striking pattern."⁵)

Agnes protests against these limits in two different ways. At times, she simply ignores them. She criticizes her students even when she has been told not to, and she refuses to flatter and cajole her students even when she is reminded that doing so would be effective. In ignoring the limits set on her speech, she continually runs the risk of losing her job: it is no coincidence that the day that Agnes exchanges "the greatest number of words" with her employer is also the day that the two of them make their "nearest approach to a quarrel" (*AG* 46). At other times, however, Agnes protests against the limits on her speech by following them more stringently than she need do, refusing to say even the little that she is permitted. She suffers from nausea when riding backwards in the carriage, but does not ask to change her seat; she suffers from chills when walking in the garden, but does not ask to go inside. She is allowed very little time to visit her family, but does not ask for more. And when falsely accused of failing at her job, she does not try to defend herself but instead chooses "to keep silence, and bear all, like a self-convicted culprit" (*AG* 48).

The limits imposed on what workers can say are significant because they shape the novels' narration and, with the narration, the novels' capacity to depict work. For Charlotte Brontë, narration functions to compensate for the limits on characters' speech: as narrators, her protagonists can say to their readers all that they are not permitted, as characters, to say. In *The Professor*, for instance, the clerk does not reply directly to the man who accuses him of being an automaton, but instead informs the novel's readers that he is not "a block, or a piece of furniture, but an acting, thinking, sentient man" (57). Compensatory narration creates a particularly intimate relation between reader and narrator, most famously in the case of *Jane Eyre*, and only in *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë's final novel, does this intimacy falter. Anne Brontë promises a similar relation in the opening pages of *Agnes Grey*, when Agnes informs the readers that she will tell them things that she would "not disclose to the most intimate friend" (*AG* 1), but as the novel goes on a quite different relation takes shape: unlike Charlotte Brontë's narrators, Agnes does not allow her narration to compensate for the limits on her speech. When the subject is courtship, this is a familiar technique that confirms that Agnes is a proper lady. Just as she refuses to "express half the gratitude" she feels to the curate who gives her flowers (*AG* 107), so too she cuts herself off in the middle of a narrated reverie: "And how delightful it would be to—(But no matter what I

thought)" (AG 110). Such refusals are part of a highly legible code, one that leaves Agnes's readers in no doubt as to her true feelings.⁶

When Agnes is narrating her work as a governess, however, the refusals in her narration are much more difficult to decode. In these passages, Agnes no longer addresses her readers as "intimate friends," but instead takes it for granted that they will be hostile to what she has to say. Indeed, she imagines her readers to be much like her employers, uninterested in her sufferings and easily bored by her concerns. And so Agnes responds to her readers as she responds to her employers, by saying even less than she might. She informs her readers that she will "spare" them a description of her happiness upon returning to her family after months of governessing (AG 33); she will not "inflict" upon them an account of her journey to take a second post (AG 55); nor will she "bore" them by recounting all that happened in her new situation (AG 59).

But even as Agnes claims to be saving her readers from what they would not find interesting, she nonetheless emphasizes its deep interest for her. The scenes she condenses or elides are, she emphasizes, the very ones that she relives in her own mind again and again. In this way, Anne Brontë creates a narrator that is every bit as punitive as the much more notoriously sadistic Lucy Snowe. More importantly, she also manages not merely to record the social impediments to depicting labor but also to reproduce them, placing readers in the uncomfortable position of her heartless employers.

There is a formal impediment to depicting work as well: work does not stop, and it does not vary, and this is one reason why Scarry sees work as fundamentally at odds with narrative.

Work is action rather than a discrete action: it has no identifiable beginning or end; if it were an exceptional action, or even "an action," it could—like the acts in epic, heroic, or military literature—be easily accommodated in narrative. [But] it is the essential nature of work to be perpetual, repetitive, habitual.⁷

Scarry here places the emphasis on the problem of indiscreteness, on the difficulty of fitting an ongoing process into a bounded work of art. Anne and Charlotte Brontë, by contrast, are more interested in the problem of repetition: the difficulty of making a narrative out of a string of repeated events. The great theorist of repetition in narrative is, of course, Gérard Genette, who observes that the classic nineteenth-century novels depict repeated events, what he calls "the iterative narrative," only when they are subordinated to the novel's primary narrative, the sequence of singular events.⁸ Anne Brontë, I want to argue,

is rare among nineteenth-century novelists in exploring what it would mean to make the iterative narrative primary.

When we think of repetitive work, it is most often manual labor that comes to mind; indeed, Charlotte Brontë uses the repetitiveness of handloom labor as a standard against which to measure other forms of labor, describing the curates of the parish in *Shirley* as "heavy with ennui, more cursed with monotony than the toil of the weaver at his loom" (*Shirley* 6–7). But Charlotte and Anne Brontë both recognize that teaching can be equally repetitive. Jane Eyre speaks of her "monotonous life," while Agnes Grey speaks of "weary monotony [and] lonely drudgery" (AG 96), and Lucy Snowe despairs when she looks toward a future that is no different from her present circumstances.⁹ Charlotte Brontë, however, alludes to the repetitiveness of the teacher's labor without attempting to depict it. It is Anne Brontë who attempts to depict the work that teachers do: Agnes struggles with her students during lessons; they drag her through the mud during recess; she is reprimanded by their father for allowing them to get dirty, and she is forced to listen to a quarrel between the parents over luncheon; then, in the afternoon, it is lessons, mud, and reprimands, all over again. It is not possible to make a narrative of such repetitions, and so Anne Brontë relies on two formal techniques. The first is what Genette would call "ellipsis."¹⁰ Agnes skips years in her narration, noting nothing more than the amount of time that has passed. The second technique is synecdoche, a single instance used to stand in for a series of repeated events. Agnes depicts her first day of governessing, and then says "this . . . is a very favourable specimen of a day's proceedings" (AG 24). In the place of narrative, we get character portraits, with Agnes taking her students one by one and describing each in turn, a strategy that gives no very clear sense of what it is like when all of them are together. The same thing happens when Agnes begins working in a second family: acknowledging that she cannot give in "minute detail" an account of each of her days, she chooses instead to make a "slight sketch of the different members of the family" as well as a "general view" of the first few years of her employment there (AG 59). Narrative is thus replaced by analysis.

In this way, Anne Brontë confronts the formal impediments to depicting work that Scarry had described. But her failed efforts to depict it, in the middle of *Agnes Grey*, throw into relief an aspect of depicting work that Scarry does not discuss: repetition can be managed in relation to a projected end. Viewed against a projected end, seemingly identical events are shown to be different, at least insofar as they hasten or postpone what will ultimately come. We can see a clear example of this in the one attempt Emily Brontë makes to depict an everyday experience. This attempt comes in the fragments of Catherine Earnshaw's diary, which recounts a typically "awful Sunday" of

Catherine and Heathcliff sitting in a frigid attic through a church service that lasts three hours long and then forbidden to play or talk or do anything but sit still through the rest of the day. All of this would be almost as tedious in the reading as it would have been to experience if Catherine had not framed her account of the day with reference to a coming end. "H[earthcliff] and I are going to rebel—we took our initiatory steps this evening."¹¹ In planning to rebel, Catherine projects an end where there would otherwise be nothing but repetition of the same. And with that end projected, suddenly differences appear between the repetitions. Everything that follows, whether in Catherine's diary or in the novel's own narration, can be understood as either hastening or hindering the ultimate "rebellion."

In *Wuthering Heights*, the end point that manages lack of event must be explicitly named: rebellion. But end points can also be signaled more subtly through the expectations prompted by plot. As soon as a young person sets out in the world, as soon as a young woman reaches a marriageable age, we know that we are reading a *Bildungsroman* or a courtship plot, and we can project where the plots will end. And the structure of the plot throws into relief the differences between seemingly similar events. Put another way, experiences are not repetitive in themselves; they come to seem repetitive only when they are not ordered by familiar plots. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), for instance, would be nothing more than a sequence of calls, balls, and dinners, if we did not understand that each of these events was either advancing or delaying the marriages that we know will constitute its end. In much the same way, *Père Goriot* (1834) would be a repetitive sequence of visits to the salons of various countesses and baronesses, if we did not understand that each of these visits was moving us closer to or farther from the center of Parisian life.

Anne Brontë does not make this claim explicitly, of course, but we can infer it from the failure of her novel's middle. If Agnes's teaching seems repetitive, indeed so repetitive as to undo narrative, it is because the *Bildungsroman* plot has broken down. Although Agnes sets out in great confidence to make her way in the world, her lack of authority as a governess prevents her *Bildung* from proceeding. There is no possibility for Agnes's own education or advancement, since the best governesses, as Agnes's officious employer informs her, "completely [identify] themselves" with the interests of their students (AG 152). Nor is there any possibility that the students will become the subject of a *Bildungsroman* themselves, for their parents are so indulgent, and their governess so disempowered, that they do not improve at all. The student who lies and throws tantrums, the student who torments animals, the student who hangs around the stables and swears, and the student who flirts shamelessly—none of them are persuaded by Agnes to change their behavior at all. And so just as

the limits placed on Agnes's speech deform her narration, so too her lack of agency causes the *Bildungsroman* to break down.

Once the *Bildungsroman* breaks down, Anne Brontë must find a new plot. She briefly alludes to one when she imagines, for the only time in the novel, a group of readers willing to hear what she has to say:

I have not enumerated half of the vexatious propensities of my pupils, or half the troubles resulting from my heavy responsibilities, for fear of trespassing too much upon the reader's patience, as, perhaps, I have already done; but my design, in writing the last few pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern: he that has no interest in such matters will doubtless have skipped them over with a cursory glance, and perhaps, a malediction against the prolixity of the writer; but, if a parent has, therefore, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains. (AG 33–34)

Halfway through, the passage begins to imagine *Agnes Grey* becoming a different kind of novel, a reformist exposé of governnessing, much like the many pamphlets and tracts that began to be printed in the 1840s.¹² For such a novel it is easy to project an end, if only one that exists outside the novel itself: readers would learn from Agnes's experiences to rear their children more wisely and treat their governesses more kindly, and each day that Agnes endures brings such "benefits" closer to fulfillment. In this way, the reformist plot not only offers a narrative capable of ordering repetition but also establishes a new relation between Agnes and her imagined readers. For while the passage begins by addressing these readers as indifferent, as people whose "patience" might be easily trespassed upon, it soon addresses them as people who can be relied on to fill in what Agnes herself cannot say: she has "not enumerated half" of her students' "vexatious propensities" nor half of the "troubles" that result, but she relies on her new imagined audience to fill in all that she has not said.

But the reformist plot is dropped as soon as it is imagined, and the middle of *Agnes Grey* goes on for many more pages, until Agnes's student finally comes out and the courtship plot begins. The emergence of the courtship plot brings the depiction of work to an end. Once Agnes's older student has come out, we hear no more of her experiences teaching the younger one. And once Agnes falls in love, even the establishment of a school, that desired culmination in Charlotte Brontë's *Bildungsroman* plots, hardly registers on her at all: Agnes and her mother open a school together, but Agnes tells us nothing about her students or her teaching, only about her sad waiting and wondering whether she would ever hear from the curate again.

In this way, Anne Brontë's adoption of the courtship plot can seem like a disappointing abandonment of more unusual subject matter. Instead of finding a way to depict work, the novel simply stops trying to do so and what follows is a remarkably conventional courtship plot. But as the courtship plot comes to its predetermined end, something unexpected happens: a new representational problem emerges. On the penultimate page of the novel, the curate proposes, Agnes accepts, and then there is a break. When the narration resumes, Agnes acknowledges the break by telling her readers, "Here I pause. My diary, from which I compiled these pages, goes but little farther" (AG 197), and then she makes a surprising admission, "I could go on for years" (AG 197). With that admission, Anne Brontë emphasizes that marriage does not bring the story of a woman's life to an end. Yet so powerful is the ending imposed by the courtship plot that *Agnes Grey* nonetheless goes on for only one more page after marriage.

This is typical of a Victorian novel, which tends to offer only the briefest of summaries after the protagonist's marriage brings about a satisfactory end. But if Anne Brontë self-consciously conforms to this expectation in her first novel, she would challenge it and write beyond it in her second. And she would do so, I will argue, by making fuller use of a reformist plot.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Everyday Married Life

The middle of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* consists of a young woman's diary, and that diary begins as a courtship plot. A young woman named Helen has just returned from her first season in London, and her diary describes the various men whom she met there. She has rejected the proposal of one of these men, on the grounds that he was too old and too serious, but she clearly hopes to be proposed to by another, who is distinguished by dashing good looks and somewhat rakish ways. The rake does propose, and Helen accepts, over the strenuous urgings of her guardian. The two marry in due time, but the narrative does not end there. Instead, Helen's diary goes on where Agnes's diary had stopped, and the middle of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is devoted to Anne Brontë's efforts to depict the experience of married life.

Helen's experience of marriage is not a happy one. Together, she and her husband endure the crushing boredom of country house life when it rains, when hunting season is over, when the guests have stayed too long. Helen finds these experiences quite difficult to depict—and for the same reasons that Agnes had difficulties depicting governessing. Once again, there are social impediments to narration. Just as there had been limits on what a govern-

ess could say about her charges, so there are limits on what a wife may say about her husband. These limits are acknowledged quite explicitly by one of Helen's friends, who confides in a letter that she is being forced into marrying a man who terrifies her, but then vows that she will, in the future, not "permit . . . [her]self to utter a word in his dispraise"¹³ (TWH 211); she later asks that this letter, her one improper utterance, be destroyed. Such discretion is expected of a wife, and Helen abides by the same expectations. Her conception of marriage is quite different from that of her husband, who thinks of wife as a "thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home—to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her, and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic and otherwise, and patiently wait his return" (TWH 233). But Helen cannot articulate an alternative to his conception, not even in her own diary, nor can she critique her husband's behavior. He seduces one of their houseguests while Helen is watching and dismisses their son as a "worthless little idiot" and a "senseless, thankless oyster" (TWH 231; 230), but all Helen can say in response is that he is "not a *bad* man" (TWH 232), merely a man whose notions of marriage are not her own.

Helen's efforts to depict marriage confront formal impediments as well. Writing beyond the end of the courtship plot, Helen has no way of ordering the events of married life. In the absence of such a form, repetitions become painfully evident. Every spring, her husband abandons her to spend four or five months in London. Every fall, he returns to chafe against their quiet country life. During the day, when he is unable to ride and unwilling to read, he peevishly tries to distract her from the book or the child that absorbs her. In the evening, after dinner, it is the same routine of events all over again. Unable to make a narrative out of these events, Helen resorts to ellipsis, as Agnes had done. She writes only when something new has happened, and so she allows first weeks and then months—once, a full year—to elapse between one entry and the next.

In these ways, Helen's diary reaches an impasse, which is breached only when new plots emerge. These plots begin when Helen's husband begins to drink. Helen's diary soon becomes the record of the profanity, immorality, and violence that ensue when her husband and his friends go on another spree. Drunkenness was not an unprecedented subject for the nineteenth-century novel, but it was not often depicted in such detail. Contemporary reviewers were thus shocked by *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. A reviewer for the *Spectator* observed that its subject matter was too "coarse and disagreeable" for the novel itself ever to be "attractive."¹⁴ A reviewer from the *Englishwoman's Journal* speculated that it was only out of "duty" that the novel's author had taken

up the “ugly task” of depicting drunkenness, while a reviewer from the *North American Review* presumed quite the opposite, that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was written by an author who takes “morose satisfaction in developing a full and complete science of human brutality”—the same author, the reviewer went on to speculate, who had also written *Wuthering Heights* and the “offensive but powerful portions” of *Jane Eyre*.¹⁵

Anne Brontë responded to these criticisms in the preface she published with the novel’s second edition. Here, she defended her decision to depict drunkenness in such detail:

I find myself censured for depicting con amore, with “a morbid love of the coarse, if not of the brutal,” scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read, than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far, in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear . . . and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. (*TWH* 3–4)

In this preface, Anne Brontë, whose father had founded the temperance society in their parish, imagines that her novel will have a similar reformist effect. And this view of the novel has since been codified. In the preface to the 1900 Haworth edition of the Brontës’ works, Mary (Mrs. Humphry) Ward insists that “the book’s truth, so far as it is true, is scarcely the truth of the imagination”; she writes that “it is rather the truth of a tract or report.”¹⁶ And subsequent generations of critics have read *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a major work of temperance fiction.¹⁷

Charlotte Brontë would reinforce this reading of the novel as self-consciously reformist by adding that her sister’s impulse to rescue drunkards came from real life. Reflecting on Anne Brontë’s career after her death, Charlotte Brontë identified the choice of subject as an “entire mistake,” but excused that mistake on the grounds of biography. Charlotte Brontë reveals that Anne Brontë had “been called on to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused.”¹⁸ This was a guarded reference to Branwell Brontë, who was descending into alcoholism and drug addiction while Anne Brontë was working on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Nor was Anne Brontë alone in registering her brother’s decline in her work. All of the novels published by the Brontës touch on it in some way.

Hindley Earnshaw drinks himself to death in *Wuthering Heights*, as does John Reed in *Jane Eyre*. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe is hired to replace a nursery maid discovered with gin on her breath, while Jane Eyre attributes the strange noises coming from the attic to the bottle of porter in Grace Poole’s hand, and in *Shirley* the fatuous curates grow repulsively “hilarious” over their post-dinner glass of wine (9), while the more admirable characters find no charm in the “wretched black bottle” (127). In *The Professor*, the protagonist explicitly identifies himself as someone who does not drink liquor or even wine, and Agnes Grey is quick to criticize the upper-class men who drink “great quantities of wine” and even some brandy and water (*AG* 43).

That Anne Brontë was distressed by her brother’s drinking, that she wished to prevent others from the same fate—this is reason enough to explain why Helen’s husband starts drinking in the middle of *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. And yet, I want to suggest that there is another reason as well. The husband’s drinking sets in motion a plot capable of resolving the difficulties of depicting married life. With respect to narration, a husband’s drunkenness frees his wife from the limits on what a wife may properly say. When her husband begins to drink, Helen begins to complain. It is only after her husband returns from a four-month sojourn in London entirely enervated by drink that Helen can, for the first time, openly criticize his behavior, first to herself and later to him. The fact that he has drunk to excess in London licenses her to admit that she would prefer that he stay with her at home; the fact that it is drink that has destroyed his health licenses her to question his insistence that she care for him, “wait upon” him, “amuse” him, “minister to his comfort,” as he would like. In this way, his drunkenness enables a range of criticisms that go much farther than drinking. Indeed, Helen first chooses to discuss her husband’s drinking with him on the night that she witnesses him flirting with one of their guests. Even she admits that the flirtation is “not referable to wine” (*TWH* 223), and yet it is the wine that justifies her in making the other complaint.

The husband’s drunkenness also brings with it alternate plots. These are the plots of temperance reform. The nineteenth-century temperance movement was, quite simply, a storytelling reform. In the eighteenth century, temperance had been an elite cause, promoted by a handful of medical men and ministers, who made scientific and religious arguments. Thus Benjamin Rush’s “thermometer,” which aligned various moral and physical consequences with the intrinsic “hotness” of a particular drink, or Joseph Livesey’s chemical demonstrations that there was no nutritious content to alcohol. But temperance became a mass social movement only after it was reconceptualized in terms of plots. Two were important. The first, which I call the cautionary temperance

tale, unfolds the inevitable consequences of drink: from the first occasion of drunkenness, or from the first exposure to spirits, or even from the very first taste of alcohol follows an unyielding trajectory of moral, physical, and economic decline, ending in death. This is the plot that Branwell Brontë would follow, and the plot that Helen's husband follows as well.

Alongside this plot is a second one, which I call the temperance conversion plot. This plot begins the same way, but then takes a turn: the drunkard becomes convinced of his danger, renounces drink, and converts to sobriety. Both of these plots percolated in Victorian fiction over the course of the century, rising from the stories told by drunkards in meetings, through anonymous tracts circulated by reformers and then didactic short stories written by such authors as Sarah Stickney Ellis, better known for her conduct books, finally reaching the works of such canonical authors as Charles Dickens, George Eliot—and Anne Brontë.

Anne Brontë's characters are aware of these plots—and aware as well of the specific ends these plots project. Helen is envisioning a temperance conversion plot every time she pleads with her husband to give up drink before it is too late, while her husband alludes to the end of the cautionary temperance tale when he callously refers to Helen's father, early in their marriage, as having “dr[u]nk himself to death” (TWH 256). In light of these two ends, death and reform, a series of otherwise repetitive actions begin to constitute a narrative. Each new bout of drinking leaves Helen's husband a little more fallen and brings him a little closer to death. And each conversation that Helen has with the least depraved of her husband's friends brings that friend a bit closer to forever renouncing drink. In this way, the relentless fall of Helen's husband, paralleled by the possible reformation of his friend, brings order to the middle of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Helen's husband starts to drink, then, in part because Anne Brontë was distressed by drinking and in part because she was experimenting with new forms capable of depicting married life. The latter motive is thrown into relief by the fact that the temperance plot is not the only one to emerge. It is shadowed by an adultery plot. Such plots are the most common way in which the nineteenth-century novel, at least prior to George Eliot and Henry James, managed to “go on” past the marriage that ends the courtship plot. In *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, Cathy's story continues past her marriage only because she is still in love with another man, and in *Agnes Grey*, the adultery is even more explicit. Here, adultery is enacted by Agnes's student, whose machinations during courtship had provided a cover for Agnes's own desires. The student is soon engaged, more quickly than Agnes herself, but then, to Agnes's horror, the engagement does not stop her flirtations with other men.

Nor does her marriage. Taken to London after her marriage, the student flirts so scandalously that her husband sends her back to the country to live in permanent seclusion with his family. She is left with no one but Agnes to visit her in the country house that has become a prison. This is the cautionary example of what it would mean, in a courtship plot, to “go on” beyond marriage.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, adultery returns, brought into the novel through the schemes of Helen's husband, who first seduces the wife of a friend and later installs his mistress as a governess. But the possibility of adultery is more richly emplotted around Helen herself. She is pursued, and is sometimes even tempted, by the most cultured of her husband's friends. She invariably rejects his advances, of course, but adultery need not be committed for the plot to perform its functions. The first function is licensing Helen to articulate her reservations about her husband; her would-be lover catalogues the husband's faults as a way of winning Helen's favor, and Helen, while assiduous in rejecting the lover's advances, is much less quick to silence his criticisms. The second function is throwing into relief the differences between Helen's otherwise repetitive days, with a good day being one in which her husband is absent and she manages to evade her suitor, and a bad day, one in which she is waylaid and courted by one or abused by the other.

The formal motivation behind the temperance plot is also revealed in the fact that the plot ends up having little substantive effect. We can gauge the plot's effect as the novel moves from the inset diary to the frame narrative, where the diary becomes a text to be read. The frame story begins in a small farming village, with the arrival of a mysterious widow and child, who will prove to be Helen and her son. Helen's difference from the villagers is marked explicitly as a difference in attitudes toward drink. They welcome her by offering her young son a glass of wine, he shrinks from it in disgust, and Helen explains that she has trained him to be repelled by wine. The villages are shocked by this, none more so than a young gentleman farmer, a self-professed “beau.” He argues that Helen's policy will deprive her son of the manliness that comes from encountering and triumphing over temptation. Helen is not persuaded, and the two part on bad terms. Over time, however, the “beau” falls in love with Helen and tries to court her. She demurs, he persists, until finally she decisively rejects his proposals, giving him her diary in order to explain her reasons. Reading this diary, which makes up the middle of the novel, the suitor learns that she is not a widow, but in fact a still-married woman, who has fled her husband because of his brutality, his adultery, and his treatment of their child.

But her suitor does not, significantly, read her diary as a cautionary temperance tale. At no point does he imagine that the consequences of Helen's

husband's drinking might constitute any warning about his own. He reads the diary, but he is not reformed. To be sure, the suitor tends to be fatuous and obtuse, but he is not entirely wrong in his reading. For the drinking of the suitor is, like Helen's own advocacy of temperance, a topic that the novel suddenly and entirely abandons toward its end. We see this after Helen's husband dies and she and the suitor are finally free to marry. Helen, who had lived through and fled from the drunkenness of one husband, marries another without insisting that he stop drinking or even discussing whether he should. Moreover, she and the suitor never resolve the question over which they had first argued, about whether or not she was foolish in forbidding her young son to drink. Whatever Anne Brontë's own commitment to temperance might have been, Helen's commitment to it has been entirely forgotten.

Anne Brontë registers this point as well through a doubling of characters. Helen's first and second husbands take their place alongside other pairings in the Brontës' novels, such as the two Mrs. Rochesters and the two Catherines. These pairings tend to measure some kind of change, with the second Mrs. Rochester learning to contain the rebellion expressed by the first or Catherine Linton learning to love more wisely and happily than Catherine Heathcliff had done. But the pairing of Helen's two husbands shows no change at all. Not only does the second husband believe, as the first had done, that drinking is the prerogative of manliness, but he, too, is the cosseted son of an indulgent mother; he, too, behaves irreverently in church; and he, even more than Helen's first husband, responds to provocations with violence. The parallels are quite precise, and they suggest that Anne Brontë recognizes that not only has temperance reform not achieved its ends, but it never will.

Conclusion

Anne Brontë has always been the neglected Brontë sister. On the occasion of Charlotte Brontë's death, one reviewer wrote, "of Anne Brontë, known as Acton Bell, we have scarce a remark to make."¹⁹ And the few remarks this reviewer did make were hardly flattering: *Agnes Grey*, he said, is a "common-place book" by a "common-place person."²⁰ This would be the view of Anne Brontë until recently, when a handful of critics began to appreciate her novels.²¹ But she still stands in the shadows of her sisters. It is not my purpose here to argue that Anne Brontë is their equal, although I do want to highlight the fact that she grappled with formal problems that did not interest Emily Brontë and that Charlotte Brontë would evade. Rather, I want to suggest that Anne

Brontë's novels, particularly their middles, offer us an occasion for reflecting on narrative and plot.

Agnes Grey and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* illustrate a fundamental truth about narrative, one that can often be difficult to teach. Narrative is a sequence of events, but it is a sequence, as theorists from Gotthold Lessing to Peter Brooks and J. Hillis Miller have argued, characterized by both sameness and difference.²² Some things must repeat, most commonly characters, so that the sequence of events will be recognizable as a sequence, and others must be different, so as to create a sense of change and causality. Usually, this is done so deftly that it can be difficult to show how the effect is achieved. But in the middles of Anne Brontë's novels, we see what happens when there is not enough difference, when the work of teaching, or the state of married life, seems like more and more of the same. We can use these middles to show our students what narrative requires by showing them what happens when those requirements are not met.

At the same time, these failures, and the experiments Anne Brontë takes to rectify them, prompt us, I would argue, to develop new ways of thinking about plot. Much has been said about the two defining plots of the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* and the courtship plot, and the most distinguished theorists of these plots, Franco Moretti and D. A. Miller, have shown how their forms, particularly their endings, reinforce their ideology.²³ What Anne Brontë's use of the temperance plot shows us, however, is that the form of familiar plots can be used for purposes quite other than what their ideology suggests. Anne Brontë, at least, was committed to the ideology of temperance reform, even though she used its plots for purely formal ends. But other authors, I have elsewhere argued, used the plots of various reform movements to emplot a range of experiences that have nothing to do with the reform's actual ideology.²⁴ What Anne Brontë's middles suggest, then, is that plots need to be understood as recognizable forms, ones that can be emptied of their substantive content and replaced with content of a quite different kind.

And finally, Anne Brontë's middles remind us that these seemingly abstract problems of narrative and plot present themselves in specific cultural contexts. Narration, in these novels, is deformed by what actual persons, workers and wives, are permitted to say. And familiar plots depend on social privilege, as when Agnes is unable to enact the *Bildungsroman* she has so hopefully projected because she is denied the agency that the plot presumes. In this way, Anne Brontë also contributes to a developing narrative theory attentive to cultural realities.

Notes

1. Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1846; 1857; London: Penguin Books, 1948), 37, 47.
2. Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (1847; London: Oxford World's Classics, 1988), 9. All further references to this edition are marked in the text as "AG."
3. Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 60.
4. Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849; London: Penguin Books, 2006), 70.
5. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853; London: Penguin Books, 1985), 102.
6. For a fuller discussion on social codes of propriety and their effect on female narration, see Alison Case, *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).
7. Scarry, *Resisting Representation*, 65. The other reason, which Scarry elaborates in a footnote (87n), is that work is fundamentally social, rather than individual, and so at odds with novelistic character.
8. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 117.
9. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; London: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 115.
10. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 106.
11. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847; New York: Norton, 2003), 16. Cited in text as "WH."
12. For a fuller discussion of these governess writings, see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 131.
13. Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten (1848; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 211. All further references to this edition are marked as "TWH."
14. Review of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, *The Spectator*, December 18, 1847. Reprinted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miria M. Allot (London: Routledge, 1974), 217.
15. "The Three Sisters," *Englishwoman's Journal*, January–February 1860; "Novels of the Season," *North American Review*, October 1848. Reprinted in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, ed. Eleanor McNees (London: Helm Information, 1996), 213, 155.
16. Mrs. Humphry Ward, "Preface," *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848; New York: Harper Brothers, 1900), xv.
17. See, for instance, Marianne Thormahlen, "The Villain of Wildfell Hall: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon," *The Modern Language Review* 88, no. 4 (October 1993): 831–41.
18. Charlotte Brontë, "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell." Reprinted in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*, 56.
19. Peter Bayne, "Curren Bell," *Hogg's Instructor*, May 1855. Reprinted in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*, 173.
20. *Englishwoman's Journal*, 223. Reprinted in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*, 223.
21. Particularly distinguished is Rachel K. Carnell's essay "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53, no. 1 (June 1998): 1–24.
22. Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984); J. Hillis Miller,

"Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 68.

23. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987); D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

24. Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).