"Lessons in the Art of Instruction": Education in Theory and Practice in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*

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Anne Brontë's first novel *Agnes Grey* (1847) has often been seen as a rewriting of the author's own experience as a governess. Although there is no reason to dispute autobiographical references, the generic qualities of Agnes's experience must not be reduced to individual episodes. The 1840s brought forward an intense interest in education, evident in the publication of numerous educational tracts, as well as in the establishment of new bodies of education for women, and in an active debate in the press. The educational issues brought up in *Agnes Grey* adhere closely to those emphasised in the contemporary debate. This article therefore proposes that Anne Brontë's novel should be viewed as a deliberate contribution to the discussion on female education in the 1840s.

Recent scholarship on *Agnes Grey* has examined the didactic intentions of the story. Elizabeth Langland, for instance, argues that "*Agnes Grey* is foremost a novel dealing with education; it is a novel *of* education (Agnes's) and *about* education (her attempts as governess to educate her charges) whose goal is to bring about an education in the reader" (1989: 97). Maria Frawley likewise writes, "Brontë's rhetoric enables her to emphasize the issues of autonomy and self-understanding at stake in Agnes's quest to define herself through her experiences as a governess" (1996: 85). Both Langland and Frawley classify Brontë's novel as a female version of the *Bildungsroman*, and although their arguments are convincing, the notion of development in the novel needs to be expanded to incorporate contemporary pedagogical aspects. In the character and actions of her protagonist, Brontë found a way to examine the common mortifications of the governess, and to discuss the actual

difficulties of conveying instruction and being a successful pedagogue. I will therefore argue that the novel is not only structured to delineate Agnes's personal and professional development, but also in a way conducive to an examination of central aspects of nineteenth-century female education.

Agnes Grey is a representative example of the governess novel genre in the sense that the middle-class heroine takes up work as a direct consequence of her father's bankruptcy; she suffers the disobligingness of upstart and snobbish mistresses, and is ultimately relieved of the governess yoke by marriage to a clergyman (see Wadsö Lecaros 2001). The novel includes several key concepts of the genre, such as social and physical marginalization, female development, and discussions of motherhood and femininity.

More important for my argument here, however, are some deviations from genre conventions. For instance, the contemporary reader would most likely note with some astonishment that Agnes actually desires to go out as a governess. Anna Jameson wrote only the year before *Agnes Grey* was published that the "occupation of governess is sought merely through necessity" (1846: 6), and the reluctance of taking up work was emphasised in many governess novels as well as in the contemporary debate. The Greys oppose Agnes's taking up governess work, but their opposition is based on her youth and unsuitability for the task, rather than on moral or class-related reasons. Another significant digression from genre conventions is that, unlike most governess heroines, Agnes turns out to be a poor teacher who gains but little influence over her charges. By presenting Agnes as a flawed heroine, Brontë manages not only to highlight the precarious situation of governesses but, more importantly, to demonstrate some shortcomings of the contemporary educational system.

In order to identify and discuss central educational aspects in *Agnes Grey*, this article will focus on the multifaceted character of the novel. I will argue that, although seemingly a straightforward account of a young woman's mishaps in a consecutive chain of events, Brontë's novel is studded with paradoxes. My argument will

be based on the assumption that the dialogic relation between the different layers of the text reveals important contradictions and inconsistencies concerning educational ideals and maternal roles. As this article aims to show, the debate on female education of the 1840s furnishes us with the tools needed to bring the covert text up to the surface and thereby to disclose and analyse the paradoxes embedded in *Agnes Grey*.

Nineteenth-century female education

All through the nineteenth century, critics were resolute and unanimous in their disapproval of the condition of female education. One core issue in the debate concerning female education was the keenly felt discrepancy between an educational ideal and the perceived reality. From writers such as Priscilla Wakefield, Hannah More, and Elizabeth Hamilton at the turn of the century, to later critics as diverse as Sarah Ellis, Dinah Mulock Craik, Elizabeth Sewell and Bessie Rayner Parkes, it was unanimously claimed that female education was not serving its purpose. It was contended that the future lives of young girls were not taken into consideration in their education. Instead of being trained for household management and maternity, they were educated purely for the marriage market. In 1843, Sarah Stickney Ellis quite typically argued, "the present education of the women of England does not [...] convert them from helpless children, into such characters as all women must be, in order to be either esteemed or admired" (1843: 62). Two decades later, another educational writer maintained that girls were trained "for the mere effect of husband-hunting" instead of "the art of husband-keeping" (Mair 1866: 109).

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, social development and the rise of the middle classes created an increased interest in and need for education for professional reasons. Since they lacked signs of power such as titles and landed wealth, the middle classes based their increased power on aspects of productivity and ability (cf. Levy 1991: 24n). To some extent, education therefore served as a means of social advancement. The fact that

middle-class parents sought to furnish their daughters with an education that would enable them to marry well should be seen in this light, marriage being the only way of upward social mobility open to women at the time.

In connection with the social importance of female education, its division into so-called 'sound education' and 'accomplishments' is relevant. Sound education primarily included English in all its branches – that is, reading, writing, spelling, and grammar – history, geography, and arithmetic. Sometimes science, in the form of botany and geology, was also included. The accomplishments, on the other hand, consisted of French and other foreign languages, drawing, music, dancing, and fine needlework. The division of subjects into two separate categories manifests two distinct educational aims. The chief reason why accomplishments were given prominence over intellectual training in many families was their high social value, especially on the marriage market. The reciprocal aspects of the two groups should not be underestimated, however, and sometimes the two components were overlapping. When science for women became fashionable, botany almost became an accomplishment, and, vice versa, there were girls who studied foreign languages for the express purpose of making use of their skills as translators or teachers.

In *Agnes Grey*, the two components of female education are juxtaposed on several levels, and the differences in education between the protagonist and her pupils are surface in social standing as well as ambitions. All through the book, Agnes's own educational background comes into conflict with the focus on accomplishments as a means of social advancement. Since the Greys have not furnished their daughter with an accomplished education, she faces trouble having to teach and practise these subjects. At the beginning of the story she admits, "I had not been taught to cut out a single garment; and except plain hemming and seaming there was little I could do" (67). Therefore, having to take charge of Mary Ann Bloomfield's clothes is troublesome for Agnes, as seen in her constant worry that the little girl will ruin her clothes. Later, with the Murrays, Agnes admits that "[o]f fancy-work I knew nothing but what I gathered from my pupil and my own observation" (122), thus revealing her lack of knowledge of fine needlework, which is

actually one of the accomplishments Mrs Murray wishes her daughters to perfect. As will be further discussed below, Agnes is juxtaposed with her pupil Rosalie Murray in a way that enables Brontë to play on the discrepancy between the sound education and the accomplishments in an unexpected way.

Agnes's lack of training in accomplishments is primarily explained by her own family's social standing – Mr Grey is a clergyman living in fairly poor circumstances. However, there is another significant reason, namely the fact that Agnes's parents have shielded their daughters from any association with upper-class life, where accomplishments would have been in focus. Having broken with her own family upon marrying the poor Mr Grey, Mrs Grey has rejected the kind of life sought after by most people Agnes comes across in the course of the novel. Being the disowned daughter of a squire, Mrs Grey offers a contrasting image to the urge for social mobility found in both Agnes's mistresses, Mrs Bloomfield and Mrs Murray. To some extent, she is a victim of circumstances, however, since her background has not provided her with the education needed to properly educate her daughter for governess work.

Agnes's problem

Drawing on the perceived incongruity between the rational educational ideal as presented in contemporary educational writing and the perceived reality among many middle and upper-class families, Anne Brontë places her inadequately educated heroine in the difficult position of defending an ideal she is not capable of embodying. Through the obstacles that Agnes encounters, Brontë can offer a critique of contemporary female education.

Like conduct books, didactic fiction to some extent has the function of providing examples, held up to the reader either as warnings or as standards to follow. The opening lines of *Agnes Grey* assert that "[a]ll true histories contain instruction" (61), and by emphasising the proposed accuracy and the didactic aspects of the story, Brontë sets a tone of realism and provides a sense of direction.

Whose instruction the story proposes to retell is not stated, however. Purporting to disclose the narrator's own painfully gained experience, it lacks the model behaviour often presented in didactic writing. The fact that there is neither an ideal governess in the novel, nor any ideal mothers, is a significant deviation from the governess novel genre. The importance of this aspect becomes apparent as the story unfolds, since Brontë's strategy is to expose problems rather than to offer advice or answers. Although contemporary reviews did not pay attention to this aspect of the novel, readers' responses suggest that her method was successful and that the novel indeed was perceived as useful. In the 1860s, Lady Amberley (Bertrand Russell's mother) noted in her diary that she would "like to give [*Agnes Grey*] to every family with a governess" and that she would "read it through again when I have a governess to remind me to be human" (quoted in Thomson 1956: 53).

From the very opening of the novel there are signs of Agnes's unsuitability as a governess, although she does not voice any awareness of this herself until later in the novel. Her reaction to her first setbacks harbours a certain amount of self-defence, since she claims that things will be better once she has adjusted to the situation. Soon, however, she is forced to admit her lack of control and she becomes more explicit concerning her own limitations. Agnes says, "[m]y task of instruction and surveillance, instead of becoming easier as my charges and I got better accustomed to each other, became more arduous as their characters unfolded" (84). Here, it is clear that she does not acknowledge her own responsibility in her pupils' formation. Brontë's contemporary Mary Maurice, a sister of F. D. Maurice, argued the necessity for teachers to adapt to the individual needs of her pupils: "A wise governess will not only study the characters of her pupils, but also their tastes, and will adapt her instructions accordingly" (1849: 84). All through the novel, Agnes's difficulties are to a large extent based on her inability to adapt.

Reflecting on her work as a governess, Agnes states, "my design [...] was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern [...] if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am

well rewarded for my pains" (94). The rhetoric of the nineteenth-century conduct book is apparent in this phrase. In the preface of manuals and other kinds of advice books, the author typically expresses a wish that her advice will be of help to the reader. Likewise, in manuals explicitly dealing with governess work, the writer usually leans on her long experience when recommending young readers to certain approaches or pedagogical methods.

Long before Agnes reveals that she actually has an educational "design", it has become apparent that a plan and structure is exactly what she lacks. Brontë exposes the inadequacy of her protagonist through this contradictory statement, and the pedagogical discussion comes into sight, as these paradoxes are uncovered. Unlike Cates Baldridge, who argues that *Agnes Grey* "is a pedagogic treatise of sorts, though the author herself doesn't fully realise it" and that "the text's true subject is so difficult to pin down because its pedagogical concerns are not 'narrow' at all" (1993: 39), I would argue that Anne Brontë's discussion on female education should be seen as highly specialised, and, furthermore, highly cognisant. To verify this, I propose to bring up and examine three issues connected to discipline and maternity that come under scrutiny in the novel. The first and perhaps most important topic concerns the discipline and responsibility of the teacher herself; the second one is the assumption that there is a relation between discipline and motherhood; and the third issue is based on the idea that regularity and discipline are necessary for educational improvement.

The discipline of the teacher

Instead of depicting a pedagogical model, Anne Brontë chose to equip her protagonist with characteristics that the contemporary debate identified as vital parts of the problem of female education. Agnes's lack of preparation for her task is presented as the root of her disciplinary difficulties. M. A. Stodart's *Principles of Education Practicably Considered* (1844) outlined some of the perceived deficiencies as depending on the low professional quality of teachers in England. Pointing out that many governesses were badly educated, too young

and too inexperienced, and therefore acting without any system, Stodart expressed a representative attitude at the time. She described the problem of young governesses in the following way:

> [Y]oung persons are necessarily little acquainted with the depth of wickedness in their own hearts; this fearful truth discloses itself in its length and breadth as we travel along our pilgrim-way. Without a knowledge of the wickedness of our own hearts, we know not the difficulty, and we are unable to exercise the habit of self-control; and how is it possible to control others, if we have not learned to control ourselves? (1844: 11)

If Stodart's reasoning is applied to the novel, a link between Agnes's lack of self-control and her initial lack of self-realisation can be established. Before going out as a governess, her naïve perception of teaching and education makes her underestimate her future troubles: "How delightful it would be to be a governess! [...] Whatever others said, I felt I was fully competent to the task: the clear remembrance of my own thoughts and feelings in early childhood would be a surer guide than the instructions of the most mature adviser" (69). By thus connecting Agnes's perception of teaching to her own childhood reminiscences, Brontë shows that Agnes cannot differentiate between herself and the educational context she finds herself in as a teacher.

Not having "learned to control" herself, as Stodart put it, and therefore not able to distance herself from her own immediate feelings, Agnes is unable to distance herself from her own childhood recollections. At Wellwood, Agnes on several occasions refers to her own childhood when reflecting on her pupils' disobedience. When she threatens to punish Mary Ann for her naughtiness by not helping her, Agnes finds the child's lack of emotional reaction incredible. Thinking about herself, Agnes ponders, "[w]ith me, at her age, or under, neglect and disgrace were the most dreadful of punishments; but on her they made no impression" (88). By considering herself as a behavioural norm, Agnes is blind to any individual needs of her pupils.

Her lack of self-knowledge therefore leads her right into the lion's den of unruly charges and unaccommodating employers. Initially using "great labour and patience" (81) to make the Bloomfield children work, her persistence quickly flags, and she soon contemplates more drastic methods. Agnes's lack of self-control becomes increasingly evident as she reports her futile attempts to curb her pupils. Although claiming that "[p]atience,-firmness and perseverance were my only weapons; and these I resolved to use to the utmost" (85), her thoughts on suitable ways of penalizing her charges reveal her frustration at her own powerlessness. Thus, she reasons, "[a] few boxes on the ear" (84) or "a good birch rod would have been serviceable" (85), and before long she shakes six-year-old Mary Ann "by the shoulders, [...] pull[s] her long hair, [and] put[s] her in the corner" (88). Unlike most novelists depicting governess work, Brontë is explicit about the physical violence Agnes resorts to. Although it may be assumed that corporal punishment was commonly used in Victorian schoolrooms, educational advice books were generally explicit in their condemnation of this. Herself a governess, Emily Peart, for instance, advised fellow teachers never to show they had lost their temper (1868: 49), since that would expose a weakness the pupils could easily turn into an advantage.

Back again at the parsonage after her dismissal from the Bloomfields, Agnes's own filial defiance is referred to. Having at this point begun to reflect on her own situation, Agnes asks her mother whether she was an obedient child herself and is told, "[g]enerally, but [...] you were somewhat faulty in regard to temper". Agnes defines her difficulties with the Bloomfield children as based on their lack of emotional response to her disciplinary efforts: "I should have been glad to see these children sulky sometimes [...] for then I could have understood them". Mrs Grey points out that children's characters are not their own fault, telling Agnes, "you cannot expect stone to be as pliable as clay" (111). By linking children's behaviour to the manners and attitudes of their parents, Mrs Grey expresses a common attitude at the time. As Amanda Wicks wrote in *Education; or, The Governesses' Advocate*, "Until PARENTS *feel* their real position, and the importance and responsibility attached to it,

the Governess will not be appreciated [...] according to her merits; for if the child is neglected by them, she must not expect consideration" (1846: 11). The binary opposition between parents and governesses was a common issue in the governess debate all through the nineteenth century, but what makes this interesting in *Agnes Grey* is the way Brontë represents the responsibility of parents and governess respectively. Agnes is not capable of fulfilling her share of the arrangement, and her criticism of the Bloomfields therefore to some extent reflects back on her own inability.

Discipline and motherhood

Books on education from the mid-nineteenth century, some of which were either written by or specifically directed to mothers, often state a connection between maternity and the implementation of discipline. According to the anonymous mother behind *Hints on Early Education: Addressed to Mothers*, the responsibility of education ought to rest with parents, since they brought the children into this world "and transmitted to them their own evil disposition and temper" (1852: 4).

Apart from hereditary influence, any lack of a judicious execution of the maternal mission was assumed to be visited on the children in one way or another. *Agnes Grey* suggests such a connection between the maternal characteristics of a woman and the discipline displayed by her children. In the form of three examples – Mrs Grey, Mrs Bloomfield, and Mrs Murray – the novel proposes that mothers who shield their children from life and its potential difficulties do them harm, since they thereby fail to prepare them for life. By weaving an elastic web of maternal figures, each one casting reflections on the others, Anne Brontë examines different views of the matter. Maternity is invariably questioned in the novel, and even the surrogate mother herself – the governess – seems to lack the necessary qualifications. To contemporary readers, this kind of depiction of a governess would presumably be interpreted as severe social criticism on the part of the writer; most governess heroines

display maternal and pedagogical skills that surpass those of the biological mothers of the novel.

Brontë's novel implies that maternal indulgence leads to a lack of discipline in the children. By demonstrating parallels between the Greys and the families in which Agnes works, certain focal points are highlighted. In most governess novels, the heroine's family is set off from the employers in order to depict them as vastly superior on a moral, albeit not financial, level. In *Agnes Grey*, however, attention is drawn to certain similarities between the two agents on the governess market.

This is especially striking in the portrait of Mrs Grey. At first glance, the picture given of Mrs Grey seems to be close to a feminine ideal, most significantly in her capability as mother and teacher to her daughters. Being "at once highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment" (62) she combines three important nineteenth-century domestic virtues in a way that no other female character of the book does. Being a hardworking woman is also what ultimately serves to redeem Mrs Grey in the novel, but she nevertheless comes under attack for not having prepared her daughters sufficiently for life. The reader is told that, "being so clever and diligent herself, she was never tempted to trust her affairs to a deputy, but on the contrary, [...] whatever was the business in hand, she was apt to think that no one could do it so well as herself" (66). Agnes's elder sister Mary has admittedly been taught needlework and other household chores, but Agnes herself professes total ignorance of these matters. She carefully notes that, since she was not accepted as a helper by her mother and elder sister, her "idleness was not entirely without excuse" (67). This statement is significant, since it acknowledges Agnes's awareness of her own deficiencies.

Mrs Grey's shortcomings serve to prepare the reader for the maternal attitudes that prevail in the novel. Agnes's subsequent frustration with her mistresses' treatment of their children must therefore be seen in relation to Mrs Greys' way of treating her youngest daughter in the first part of the novel. Although they are differently positioned in life, misdirected maternal concern

nonetheless characterises all mothers in the novel. Brontë's disapproval of overprotective mothers seems clear; Mrs Grey's shielding Agnes from labour is paralleled in Mrs Bloomfield's exclamations that her little darlings have hitherto been too young for a governess and Mrs Murray's demand that education should be as easy and as little troublesome as possible for her children. At the very end of the novel, the circle is closed when Agnes herself gives reason for concern, stating that her children "shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give" (251). Whether she by this time has learned the true basis for maternal care is not disclosed.

The lack of preparation for life is detrimental for all children in the novel, although most explicitly manifested in Agnes herself and in Rosalie Murray. The teacher and the pupil are parallels, both having been spoilt by their mothers and both being victims of bad education. Due to their different stations in life, their prospects differ, however; while Agnes has to go out to work, Rosalie is destined for a successful marriage. Nonetheless, Brontë makes their histories correspond in a significant way. The young women are both around eighteen when their lives take a dramatic turn. Agnes decides to go out as a governess to help her family after her father's financial misfortunes, and Rosalie makes up her mind to catch Sir Thomas Ashby since he is the richest man in the neighbourhood. Both girls are driven by prospects of an improved financial situation, and they are stubbornly set on their ventures.

Neither of them realises what the future holds, however. Agnes says, "I should like to be a governess [...] I'm sure I could manage delightfully" (68), while Rosalie exclaims, "I *must* have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me" (172). Both girls are incapable of recognizing the potential dangers of their decisions, and interestingly enough, their mothers do not hinder them from carrying through their ventures. After having initially been opposed to Agnes's plans, Mrs Grey soon actively helps her daughter to find a situation and she thereby supports her in her decision. Mrs Murray is even more vigorous in helping her daughter in her pursuit. The main difference between Mrs Grey and Mrs Murray is that the latter is blinded by the promising prospects of having her daughter well married and

therefore does not realise the dangers of her daughter's ideas. Agnes is shocked at how her employer is rushing her daughter into marriage: "I was amazed and horrified at Mrs Murray's heartlessness, or want of thought for the real good of her child" (194), but significantly enough, she never shows the same surprise at her own mother's willingness to send her out as a governess.

It is well known that mothers in Victorian fiction seldom function as helpers to their daughters (see e.g. Manheimer 1979, Shuttleworth 1982). If they are not conspicuously absent, mothers tend to be either foolish or dangerous for their offspring. The narrative function of an 'unmotherly' mother is to give room for the heroine's development, and Anne Brontë uses this device in an unexpected manner. In contrast with Charlotte Brontë's governess heroine Jane Eyre, who is motherless and brought up under the influence of a fairy-tale-like evil stepmother in the shape of her aunt, Agnes Grey's mother is alive, well-meaning and supportive. Nonetheless, her way of mothering Agnes leads to problems, which the young governess seems unable to alleviate.

Due to her social background and her children's young age, Mrs Bloomfield is in a different position than the other mother characters of the novel. To some extent, the Bloomfields may be seen as prefiguring the Murrays, but more importantly, Mrs Bloomfield's attitude should be connected with her social background, which is vastly different from that of either Mrs Grey or Mrs Murray. The upstart Mrs Bloomfield, who lacks both knowledge and interest in education and childrearing, employs a governess to take the children off her hands and because she realises that a nurse will not be sufficient to raise her children to social respectability. A prime example of social mobility of the 1830s and 1840s, Mrs Bloomfield thus engages a governess to perform the work she is not capable of herself, but which she nonetheless realises is necessary for social advancement.

Discipline and regularity

In line with the nineteenth-century struggle for progress and development, educational writers stressed the virtues of time-management and a methodological approach to studies and schoolroom work. According to Anna Jameson, "[t]he methodological arrangement and conscientious discharge of [the] daily duties" (1846: 46) was of essential importance in the schoolroom, and Mary Maurice declared that "[o]rder, method, and punctuality, are the three secret springs on which education should move" (1849: 44). The mechanical metaphor used is typical and enhances the view of education as an active process of formation and of progress.

Educational manuals decreed that in order to prevent disorder the first thing a governess ought to do upon entering a situation was to introduce a plan for her pupils' education. Stodart, who deplored that "[f]ew women engaged in instruction are acting on any system, or have so much as a system formed in their own minds" (11-12), urged governesses to put a schedule on the wall for the children and their parents to see, and to adhere to it. Sarah Ellis in a similar manner discussed the importance of laying out a plan of the work proposed in the schoolroom and elsewhere. Although not wishing to regulate every hour of life, she stipulated some general rules, the first being "to accustom yourselves every morning to say what you are intending to do; and every night, with equal faithfulness, to say what you have actually done during the day" (1842: 33).

Many nineteenth-century didactic novels depict early risers who work efficiently, always putting duty before pleasure. In *Agnes Grey*, a discussion on issues such as regularity and time-management is present, but instead of depicting the protagonist as a model in this respect, Brontë shows us what happens when there is no regularity. Especially at Horton Lodge, Agnes repeatedly refers to the irregular manners of her pupils:

> Sometimes Matilda and John would determine 'to get all the plaguy business [i.e. their lessons] over before

> breakfast,' and send the maid to call me up at half-past five, without any scruple or apology; sometimes, I was told to be ready precisely at six, and, having dressed in a hurry, came down to an empty room and after having waited a long time in suspense, discovered that they had changed their minds, and were still in bed. (127)

At a later point, Agnes laconically comments, "where everything was left to the caprices of Miss Matilda and her sister, there could be no order or regularity" (157). So prominent is Rosalie's lack of regularity that she actually coquettes about it when circumventing Hatfield's advances as he asks her when he might see her again: "if I would, I could not inform you, for I am so im-methodological, I never can tell to-day what I shall do to-morrow" (171).

Not only the ways of the Murray girls, but also the fact that their governess is not in a position to take charge over them deserves attention. By depicting Agnes as passive and failing to maintain any order or regulation at all, Brontë discloses the inaptness of the governess. Although both the Bloomfields and the Murrays are opposed to their children having to exert themselves, and especially Mrs Murray's ideas prevent Agnes from exercising an authoritative influence, Agnes is never told not to work according to a system or to follow a schedule. The result of her own shortcomings – lack of order and method – is that her pupils belong to "a class of young persons [...] who rise every morning trusting to the day to provide its own occupations and amusements", as Ellis put it (31). It could therefore be argued that by excluding the concept of regularity – perhaps the most common issue in mid-nineteenth-century educational manuals – from Agnes's pedagogical awareness, Brontë manages to show her incompetence in a deliberate way. Just like Agnes's inability to control her pupils at Wellwood can be connected to her not having learned to control herself, her lack of success concerning regularity can be traced back to her childhood. It is clear that Agnes has not been trained according to the contemporary educational model of order and regularity. Neither has she been entrusted with work. As will be remembered, Mrs Grey is initially referred to as a woman who "was never tempted to trust

her affairs to a deputy" (66). Not until the end of the novel, when Agnes sets up a school with her mother, does Mrs Grey see her as capable, and accepts her as her co-worker. At this point, her painfully gained experience has given her an insight into the art of instruction.

Conclusion

By way of summing up my argument that *Agnes Grey* should be seen as a deliberate contribution to the contemporary educational debate, Anne Brontë's novel will be briefly compared with Eliza Cheap's *The Nursery Governess*, which was published in 1845. Cheap belongs to the plethora of nineteenth-century writers of whom not much, if anything, is known. An author of didactic religious books, she wrote, for instance, *The Week, or the Practical Duties of the Fourth Commandment* and *My Station and Its Duties: A Narrative for Girls Going to Service,* both of which went through numerous editions in the 1830s and 1840s.

The Nursery Governess is a novel with an overshadowing didactic message. In a more overt, and according to modern taste perhaps less subtle, manner than Brontë, Cheap discusses key issues in connection with female education. The plot revolves around the establishment of a Miss Egmont, who educates governesses. Miss Egmont has all that Agnes Grey lacks: experience, maturity, and wisdom. Her good judgement is transferred to her young students who learn to be good teachers although they, just like Agnes, face difficulties at the outset. The book ends with a section of advice for educators, thereby blurring genre conventions. Through the presence of a plot, the book is a novel, but its didactic message is so strong that it almost becomes an advice book.

Already in the *Preface*, Cheap makes her intention clear:

> The design of this little narrative is to show by facts derived from long observation, the nature and value of the system recommended to the notice of parents, and of nursery governesses, who should go hand in hand, in

> one prayerful, sincere, and upright purpose of seeking in faith the best, and the eternal interest of children. (1845: xvi)

As for contents, this statement could serve as an epigram for *Agnes Grey* too. Like Eliza Cheap, Anne Brontë appears to have intended to bring up certain educational issues for discussion. However, while Cheap chose to share her knowledge in a very straightforward way by presenting model examples to follow, Brontë presented her version of contemporary educational difficulties through the inherent contradictions embedded in her story.

As will be remembered, Agnes states, "my design [...] was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern [...] if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains" (94). Like Cheap, Brontë introduces employers and fellow governesses as expected beneficiaries of her text. However, there are several statements in Cheap's *Preface* that are powerfully contrasted in *Agnes Grey*. The "long observation" Cheap bases her narrative on is demonstrably absent in Brontë's novel, since Agnes is forced into difficulties having neither experience nor guidance. Brontë offers no assistance from a Miss Egmont, and Agnes's subsequent failure is demonstrably underlined by this want of guidance. Additionally, there is no perceptible "system" recommended, either in the Grey family or in any of the other families in the novel. By making educational practices the results of whims rather than of structured routines, Brontë emphasises the undefined position of the governess. As I have shown, this lack of system is partly Agnes' fault, but could to some extent have to do with her parents' and employers' actually hindering her from implementing such a system.

Furthermore, while Cheap advocates cooperation between teacher and parents, this is unattainable in Agnes' case. At first, her mother excludes her from the working community of the parental home by considering her too young, and later her employers are not interested in sharing an interest in their children's welfare with her. The last aspect mentioned by Cheap is the importance of religion, and although Agnes is a clergyman's daughter, her faith is not a vital

part of her struggle with her situation. Unlike a number of governess novels, *Agnes Grey* does not perceive religion as the answer to the governess's problems.

This article has shown that Anne Brontë's writing was more intricately related to the pedagogical debate than has hitherto been acknowledged. *Agnes Grey* should be seen as a conscious contribution to the debate in the 1840s, not only concerning the plight of the governess, but also concerning female education in general.

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