CHRONOTOPES OF ROMANCE AND REALISM: THE LOVERS' REUNION IN ANNE BRONTË'S "ALEXANDER AND ZENOBIA" AND *AGNES GREY*

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THE QUESTION of how the material imagination develops from a child to an adult writer may be approached in many ways. In the case of the Brontës, attention has tended to focus on the materiality of the miniature books in which they recorded their childhood "plays" or on the physical objects that both furnished the parsonage at Haworth and stimulated their young imaginations.[1] In this essay, I take a different approach, considering materiality in the broadest possible sense as the physical complex of space and time that defines the universe. Using this conception of materiality, I set out to chart the development of Anne Brontë's material imagination from her juvenile poetry to her post-juvenile writing by comparing representations of time and space in her teenage poem "Alexander and Zenobia" (composed 1837) and in her first mature literary work, the novel *Agnes Grey* (1847). In considering the movement of characters through time and space in these two texts, I focus on a specific narrative motif—the lovers' reunion—in order to identify both continuities and differences between Brontë's youthful and more mature literary methods.

Lovers' reunions do not only resolve the plots of "Alexander and Zenobia" and *Agnes Grey*. They also, through the particular manner in which they fuse time with space, help to reveal the genre or genres of each narrative. In this they function as *chronotopes*, formal literary expressions of the space-time materiality within which we live our lives.[2] The theorisation of literary chronotopes by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) is a constant point of reference in my discussion, and suggests a broad historical context for Anne Brontë's evolving literary practice from child writer to adult author. Although Bakhtin developed his theory of chronotopes in relation to narrative *prose* fiction (especially the novel), nothing in his theory precludes its application to narrative in other genres, including poetry. Indeed, "a number of scholars have hypothesised that some chronotopic configuration underlies every kind of narrative, however minimal, including jokes, strip cartoons, fairy tales, animal

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stories, narrative poetry and the like" (Bemong and Borghart 9). Regardless of whether its form is prose or verse, any literary work written in a narrative mode is therefore suitable for chronotopic analysis. When such an analysis is applied to "Alexander and Zenobia" and *Agnes Grey*, we find that Brontë's youthful poem is set entirely in the abstract temporality and space of the adventure romance, whereas *Agnes Grey* discards certain elements of the romance chronotope but preserves others, folding them into the everyday time and place of the realist novel to achieve an ending that partakes of both genres.

"Alexander and Zenobia," a verse narrative consisting of sixty-eight mainly four-line stanzas,[3] was composed by Anne Brontë between 26 June and 1 July 1837, when she was seventeen years old. Emily Brontë's "Diary Paper" of 26 June 1837 records Anne working on this poem in the drawing room at Haworth Parsonage around 4:00 pm on that day (*DP* 7). As Emily recounts what she and other members of the household were doing at the same time, she makes her real and imagined worlds seem contiguous, so that events such as Tabby being in the kitchen and the emperors of Gondal preparing for a journey seem to be taking place on a single, continuous plane of happening (*DP* 7–8). A reader of Anne's poem, though, will be struck by something quite different: the vast gulf between the circumstances in time and space of the poem's composition and the imagined time and space of the poem's action. So, while in Haworth it was "a fine rather coolish thin grey cloudy but sunny day" (*DP* 7), the poem features bright sun, sweet breezes and cloudless heavens (*DP* 46; st. 1). The Diary Paper mentions a series of domestic interiors such as "the drawing room," "the little Room," and "the kitchin" (*DP* 7), whereas the poem unfolds completely outdoors. And of course the Brontës were in Yorkshire, but the poem begins in "Arabia's distant land" (*DP* 46; st. 2).

In addition to these verbal representations of the real and imagined locations relevant to the poem and its composition, we are lucky to have a graphic representation of each. Emily's sketch in the Diary Paper of Anne and herself writing in the drawing room (*DP* frontispiece) is notable for its angular table and window shapes contrasting with the circles and ovals used to denote the girls' heads, hair, sleeves, and dresses. There is a kind of visual rhyme between the loosely drawn window frames and the scattered books and papers on the table, which suggests a connection between the act of writing and the means of gaining access to a wider, unenclosed world. In contrast to Emily's sketch, Anne's illustration on the MS of the poem, described by editors Christine Alexander and Mandy Swann as "a tiny pencil sketch of a desert with the setting sun and a grove of trees in the foreground" (*DP* 46n1), represents an outdoor space of exotic freedom unencumbered by walls or furniture. Superficially, this contrast appears very simple and understandable: a teenage girl of vivid imagination creates a fantasy world as unlike her real world as possible—a warm, sunny world of love and adventure, and of limitless mobility. The geographical scope of Anne's poem is extremely large, and includes Graecia (Southern Italy), Araby (the Middle East), and Gondal (an imaginary northern land, something like Scotland). In the world of her poem, there seem to be no physical impediments to travel, no worrying

about ways and means for getting from one place to another, far distant one. Consequently, the poem conveys a sense of complete freedom that is rarely to be found again in Brontë's later writing.[4]

However, if we look at the poem's handling of time, we find that in this regard the characters' liberty is greatly diminished. The first crisis in the poem occurs when Zenobia tells Alexander, "To-morrow we must part" (*DP* 48; st. 13). We do not know why they must part, and Alexander never asks. He questions *that* they must part, not *why*, and his questioning is purely rhetorical, an expression of emotion at the prospect of parting from his love, not a serious proposition that they might evade the decrees of fate:

> "And shall we part so soon," he cried
> "Must we be torn away
> Shall I be left to mourn alone
> Will you no longer stay?
>
> And shall we never meet again—
> Hearts that have grown together?
> Must they at once be rent away
> And kept apart for ever?" (*DP* 49; sts. 17–18)

The temporal markers in those two stanzas reveal much about the way causality operates in the world of this poem. Indications of immediacy or suddenness—"so soon," "no longer," "at once"—cannot be avoided or circumvented, whereas indications of longevity or permanence—"never," "for ever"—may possibly be prevented or even conquered. It seems that the characters have no agency with regard to the former, but some agency with regard to the latter. That sliver of agency is the key to the poem having a story at all, and particularly to its having a happy ending.

Around the middle of the poem (sts. 29–30), the lovers agree to meet two years hence at a particular place where they were once, in the past, together (*DP* 51). The unexplained stipulation of two years is, it seems, quite arbitrary. This will be the test of their commitment to each other: whether they succeed in meeting again at a particular time in a specific place. If one of them gets the time wrong or the place wrong, that will be the end of their love. So the poem's very simple plot is that the lovers part, they hope to meet again, and at the end they are indeed reunited. In the second part there are some delays and a sense of the clock ticking down, which add suspense, but in fact the plot is resolved very straightforwardly.

To complete our understanding of how time and space operate in this poem, we also need to acknowledge that the parting and reunion recounted here are not the first the lovers have experienced. There has been a previous parting, again unexplained: Zenobia simply recalls, "We thought that we had bid adieu / To meet on earth no more" (*DP* 49; st. 20). There has also been a previous reunion. Zenobia remembers,

> we little thought
> After so long a time,
> To meet again so suddenly
> In such a distant clime. (*DP* 50; st. 22)

It seems that the lovers have been locked in a cycle of unexplained and ineluctable partings, followed by fortuitous reunions. Will the reunion that closes the poem "at last" really be the last? We cannot know; certainly, the poem gives no indication that it must be.

The conceptions of time and space in this poem are very similar to those described by Mikhail Bakhtin in the section on the particular chronotope of "The Greek Romance" in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" (1937–38). Bakhtin begins his analysis by discussing a form of ancient Greek romance which he calls "the adventure novel of ordeal." In narratives of this kind, a young boy and girl "remarkable for their exceptional beauty" meet and

> a sudden and instantaneous passion flares up between them that is as irresistible as fate, like an incurable disease. However, the marriage cannot take place straightaway. They are confronted with obstacles that retard and delay their union. The lovers are *parted*, they seek one another, find one another; again they lose each other, again they find each other. (*FT* 87–88)

In such romances, Bakhtin stipulates, "The action of the plot unfolds against a very broad and varied geographical background, usually in three to five countries separated by seas" (*FT* 88).

Narratives of this type employ a specific temporality which Bakhtin calls "adventure-time" (*FT* 89), the most notable features of which are also found in "Alexander and Zenobia". First, there is a complete absence of change in the characters, no matter how many ordeals they go through. Events do not have "psychological significance" (*FT* 90); nor do they register upon the bodies of the protagonists. Indeed, Bakhtin explains, "time-sequences" in the adventure romance "are neither historical, quotidian, biographical, nor even biological and maturational" (*FT* 91). Secondly, events tend to occur abruptly and without warning. As Bakhtin writes: "'Suddenly' and 'at just that moment' best characterize this type of time," which is governed by sequences of random meetings and equally "random *disjunctions*." In such a world, events must happen at exactly the right time, or not at all: "Should something happen a minute earlier or a minute later, that is, should there be no chance simultaneity or chance disjunctions in time, there would be no plot at all, and nothing to write a novel about" (*FT* 92). Consequently, the most important plot motif in this type of narrative is the meeting and its opposite, the non-meeting (*FT* 97).

Romance's adventure-time requires a particular kind of adventure-space, which Bakhtin calls "an *abstract* expanse of space" (*FT* 99). The sequence of adventures, which is built around meetings, partings, non-meetings and reunions,

"requires large spaces, land and seas, different countries. The world of these romances is large and diverse. But this size and diversity is utterly abstract" (*FT* 99–100). In such an imaginative world, Bakhtin argues, all movements are reversible and different localities are largely interchangeable. To make that easier, specificity and concreteness of the depicted world are avoided. Hence, as well as being unchanging and essentially passive, the characters who move through adventure-space according to the rhythms of adventure-time are private and solitary, lacking "any organic connection" with country, city, social group, clan or family. They are not part of any social network; instead, they roam a world that may be characterised as "*abstract-alien*" (*FT* 108).

Bakhtin concludes his remarks on the ancient Greek "adventure novel of ordeal" by declaring:

> The most abstract of all chronotopes is also the most static. In such a chronotope the world and the individual are finished items, absolutely immobile. In it there is no potential for evolution, for growth, for change. As a result of the action described in the novel, nothing in its world is destroyed, remade, changed or created anew. (*FT* 110)

All this may be summed up in the aphorism: "Adventure-time leaves no trace" (*FT* 110).

Brontë's juvenile poem "Alexander and Zenobia" exhibits many features of the romance chronotope as theorised by Bakhtin, including vast geographical scope, unlimited mobility, sudden and unexplained events, multiple meetings and separations, unchanging characters, and time that leaves no trace. One would expect to find a different and more mature handling of time and space in *Agnes Grey*, which was published ten years after the composition of "Alexander and Zenobia." In particular, it would seem likely that the author's much greater life experience, coupled with her shift from poetry to prose fiction, would result in a generic move from romance to realism, and that this would affect her handling of the narrative motif of the lovers' reunion. To a significant extent these expectations are realised, although the conventions of the romance chronotope are not entirely abandoned.

In *Agnes Grey*, the parting of Agnes from Mr. Weston, the man she loves, occurs in Chapter 20, aptly titled "The Farewell." The chapter recounts Agnes's final attendance at church before quitting her governess's post at Horton Lodge. She listens to the sermon delivered by the curate, Mr. Weston, believing it is "the last I was to hear from him" (*AG* 145). After the church service, she engages in an internal moral discourse on the need to bid "adieu to fruitless dreaming" and henceforth to embrace "sober, solid, sad reality" by giving up her fantasy of marrying Mr. Weston (*AG* 146).[5] While Agnes is absorbed in these thoughts, the object of them approaches her to say good-bye and to ask a crucial question: "It is possible we may meet again …; will it be of any consequence to you whether

we do or not?" Agnes replies: "Yes, I should be very glad to see you again," and they part company (*AG* 146).

A noteworthy feature of this scene, in contrast to "Alexander and Zenobia," is that the separation of the lovers has a realistic cause: the serious ill health of Agnes's father, which requires her to return home. Unlike the parting of the lovers in "Alexander and Zenobia", this separation is not the result of a mysterious decree of fate. A second important difference between the two texts is the way the lovers are represented in this scene (and throughout the novel) as social beings enmeshed in social ties—familial, professional, and class-based—which affect what they can do and what they cannot. These are two indications of the new realist mode in which Anne Brontë had by now taught herself to write. There is still a possibility of romance, which we glimpse in Mr. Weston's question and Agnes's answer, but that possibility is now encased in the accoutrements of realism.

The mixing of the two genres is evident in Brontë's narration of the lovers' reunion in Chapter 24, "The Sands." Agnes, having relocated to the seaside town of A--- with her mother, goes for a solitary early-morning walk along the beach and unexpectedly encounters "two old friends"—the dog Snap and Mr. Weston, both of whom she loved and thought she had lost (*AG* 170). Because *Agnes Grey* is a novel rather than a romance, its plot-sequences require realistic causation**.** As Agnes thinks when Snap comes running up to her, "He could not have dropped from the sky" (*AG* 166), and neither, of course, could Mr. Weston. Snap is there because Mr. Weston is his new owner, and Mr. Weston is there because he has moved to a nearby village and he likes walking on the sands—and also because he knows Agnes lives there and has been hoping he might encounter her. Yet notwithstanding these realistic causes, there is still an element of chance in their meeting. Mr. Weston says he has walked on the sands "'many times, both morning and evening … and never seen'" her until that moment (*AG* 168). They meet on this occasion only because she has come out walking, on this day, particularly early. He observes, "You rise early," and she replies, "Not often so early as this" (*AG* 166). Here, the spectre of the all-too-possible missed chance signals that the romance-chronotope elements of random encounter and split-second timing are still in play; for, in Bakhtin's words, "adventure-time lives a rather fraught life in the romance; one day, one hour, even one minute earlier or later have everywhere a decisive and fatal significance" (*FT* 94). In the scene on the sands, the lingering influence of adventure-time is folded into a more realistic sense of what Bakhtin calls "everyday time" (*FT* 247).

Another indicator of the overall realistic mode within which Brontë is writing is the scene's focus on social connections, especially family and professional networks. Changes in the careers of each have brought the lovers, separately, to the town of A---. Agnes has given up governess work in order to run a school with her mother, while Mr. Weston has been assigned to a new parish of the Anglican Church. Their reunion has thus been made possible by the combined effects of the professional circumstances of each of the lovers. The social envelope within which the characters enact their life-choices is represented in this scene through material details within Brontë's description of the town, details

which affect (and may constrain) the way the characters are able to move through physical space:

> Here the conversation was interrupted by a water-cart lumbering past us, for we were now come to the busy part of the sands; and, for the next eight or ten minutes, between carts and horses, and asses, and men, there was little room for social intercourse, till we had turned our backs upon the sea, and begun to ascend the precipitous road leading into the town. (*AG* 168)

How closely enmeshed time and space are here! The lovers' path forward is literally crossed by traffic, a material manifestation of the processes of trade and commerce that underpin the life of the town. As a result, the lovers' progress is impeded, but not prevented. They have to be patient for "eight or ten minutes," but then they are able to resume their conversation and thereby their progress towards an understanding that will lead to marriage.

The social networks and physical impediments emphasised in this chapter of *Agnes Grey* are precisely the kinds of complications and concretisations that are absent from "Alexander and Zenobia." In his discussion of the romance chronotope, Bakhtin explained why such elements could not co-exist with "adventure-time":

> In this chronotope all initiative and power belongs to chance. Therefore, the degree of *specificity* and *concreteness* of this world is necessarily very limited. For any concretization—geographic, economic, sociopolitical, quotidian—would fetter the freedom and flexibility of the adventures and limit the absolute power of chance. Every concretization, of even the most simple and everyday variety, would introduce its own *rule-generating force*, its own *order*, its *inevitable ties* to human life and to the time specific to that life. Events would end up being interwoven with these rules, and to a greater or lesser extent would find themselves participating in this order, subject to its ties. (*FT* 100)

Because the scene takes place in a town, the lovers are subject here to "the time specific to that life," the life of the town. It manifests in this instance as what we could call "traffic time," that is, the time it takes for all the carts and horses and donkeys and men to pass the two pedestrians. These are concretisations with which the lovers must contend—and they do. They must, if their chance meeting on the sands is to turn into a lifelong reunion.

It is tempting to think that if the concrete manifestations of town life operate here as emissaries of realism, the enduring power of romance is represented by the co-presence of nature—specifically the sea—in the scene. The language Brontë uses to describe the sea and its effect upon Agnes is reminiscent of the language of "Alexander and Zenobia," because it partakes of the ideal (*AG* 164–

65). But Agnes must thread her way through the material reality of the town in order to reach this locus of ideal beauty. She records that their house in A--- was "a considerable distance from the sea, and divided from it by a labyrinth of streets and houses. But the sea was my delight; and I would often gladly pierce the town to obtain the pleasure of a walk beside it" (*AG* 164). At first, in her walk along the sands, the seaside is empty of other human beings: her footsteps are the first to mark the sand. Then after forty-five minutes (the time is given exactly), the town begins to irrupt into the ideal space of the seaside. This might be seen as a loss, but among the influx of people onto the sand is "one gentleman with a little dark speck of a dog running before him" (*AG* 165), and this turns out to be Mr. Weston with Snap. So the irruption is not a rupture; in fact, it is necessary to bring the lovers together within a realm in which nature and society co-exist.

In both this chapter and the following one ("Conclusion"), which records the fulfillment of the romantic hopes raised in the encounter on the sands, there is a co-presence of various chronotopic values. According to Bakhtin, "[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive," and in complex literary works, different chronotopic values co-exist in "ever more complex interrelationships" (*FT* 252). This is true of the ending of *Agnes Grey*. One key element of the romance chronotope as it operated in "Alexander and Zenobia"—the lovers' reunion at a once-only time and place—is retained but is now folded into a labyrinth of everyday social circumstances, which the lovers must navigate if they are to reach their goal of lifelong union. Other aspects of the romance chronotope are discarded: its vast geographic scope is replaced by a single English county; decrees of fate are replaced by realistic causation; adventure-time is replaced by everyday-time and even a particular subsection of that, traffic-time.

Ideal nature is no longer the total space within which the entire action unfolds, as in "Alexander and Zenobia," but it is not completely absent either. In fact, it continues to play an important part in Brontë's imagining of love fulfilled. This is evident in Agnes's description of the sea in Chapter 24 and even more in Chapter 25 and its coda, where Agnes takes the time and place of Mr. Weston's proposal—a summer evening, a coastal cliff-top—and preserves them in memory, asserting: "I shall never forget that glorious Summer evening, and always remember with delight that steep, rugged hill, and the edge of the precipice where we stood together watching the splendid sun-set mirrored on the restless world of waters at our feet" (*AG* 173–74). "Never" and "always" keep Agnes's memory of that place at that time as an unchanging idyll outside history, beyond decay.[6]

This brings in one final chronotope, that of the idyll, a vital part of which, according to Bakhtin, is "the conjoining of human life with the life of nature" (*FT* 226). Idyll is neither romance nor realism but something that partakes of both. Signifying a provincial life of love and labour, children and home, it is the chronotopic value on which Anne Brontë's first novel comes, triumphantly, to rest: a long way from Gondal and Araby, yet still infused with some of their ideal beauty.

NOTES

[1] On "plays" and playing, see Alexander and Smith, especially p. 279. For a study of Brontë material culture, see Deborah Lutz, *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects*, W. W. Norton, 2015.

[2] See *FT* 85–86: "We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. … The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions."

[3] The exception is stanza 38, which contains six lines.

[4] Themes of captivity and (partial) escape are central to Anne Brontë's two novels. With reference to *Agnes Grey* (1847), Joanna Rostek notes "the heroine's voluntary spatial mobility" in seeking employment outside the family but also the "symbolic acts of imprisonment" to which she is subjected in her role as governess (241), and suggests that through her self-repression Agnes may ultimately be "her own, most ardent jailer" (242). On the treatment of confinement and escape in Anne Brontë's second novel, see Elizabeth Langland, "'Give me back my barren hills': Representations of Space in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*, vol. 138, Winter 2020, pp. 112–23.

[5] Frawley discusses the emergence of such "internalized, self-directed dialogue" in Anne Brontë's fiction (247).

[6] Such treasured memories, Wu suggests, can provide "psychological sanctuary" (84) for women within the patriarchal world.

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