

Christiane Maria Binder

From Innocence to Experience

(Re-)Constructions of Childhood
in Victorian Women's Autobiography

Heinz Kosok, Heinz Rölleke, Michael Scheffel (Hg.)

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For my mother, my brother and my son.

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1. Introduction

In 2000 a remarkable book made its appearance at Ashgate's: *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women's Childhoods*.¹ The editor, Valerie Sanders, selected, compiled and reproduced the childhood sections of nineteenth-century women's autobiographies, making them available in print again. Her major motive for doing so was that the best known examples of childhood accounts in nineteenth-century non-fiction were still by men. She thus set out to compensate for the current absence of quite a number of Victorian women's autobiographies in print and to recover women's autobiography from obscurity and neglect. Moreover, she understood her work as adding to and expanding on that undertaken by a few female critics, especially in the 1980s, who had been concerned with an alternative female canon of writing.

In her "Introduction," Valerie Sanders emphasizes a number of important historical, theoretical, literary and cultural implications of the genre of female autobiography as a remarkable form of self-writing by women in the nineteenth century, indicative of their special concern with childhood. She points to the particular biological, educational and other links between women and childhood, giving reasons for the special significance of childhood for the women writers. In addition, she stresses the outstanding quality of some female childhood accounts; their invaluable capacity for uncovering the private and hidden parts of female lives. Her major point, however, is the remarkable contribution of these women to a literary genre and a discourse hitherto occupied by men: the female autobiographers started to claim their own lives, as well as the attention of other readers and writers. They created their own discourse and inscribed themselves individually in history, literature and culture.

In her critical assessment, Sanders pays attention to the distinctive quality and generic features of female autobiography, as compared to other forms of autobiographical writing, such as letters, memoirs, reminiscences and diaries. In autobiography, the women sought and found special forms of expression, appropriating and transforming examples of male autobiography and male models of authorship. These Victorian childhood accounts are also interlinked in generic, psychological, and social terms with spiritual autobiography, Romanticism (especially male Romantic prose writing), and working-class autobiographies, as Sanders is able to demonstrate. Furthermore, she pinpoints the diverse motives of those women autobiographers for resorting to the childhood phases of their lives and addressing issues of upbringing and education, their publicly acknowledged or implicitly stated aims in writing and eventually publishing (with a few exceptions) their accounts. Last but not least she emphasizes the special merits of recollecting and recording childhood experiences.

All this illustrates the outstanding value of Sanders's anthology as a source and resource for scholars of the nineteenth century, of Victorian literature and culture,

1 All the quotations from the autobiographical accounts in this study are taken from this edition.

feminism, childhood, and female autobiography. Moreover, the texts compiled in the anthology and the ideas expressed in the “Introduction” still offer substantial creative space for further investigation. The volume is therefore ideally suited for fresh departures in various directions of research.

So what are the objects and aims of this book? The present study investigates the material supplied by Sanders, the childhood sections of fifteen autobiographical texts by nineteenth-century women writers.² The texts are analyzed and interpreted with a special view to the representation of childhood within adult non-fiction. The field of studies is Childhood Studies. Methodologically they allow for the investigation of various important issues connected with childhood and for a broad range of methods and critical approaches to be integrated with one another. However, the major concern is the study of childhood in its thematic and formal textual manifestations, to which all the other aspects discussed are subordinated. The inscriptions of the female self in those childhood sections of the autobiographies are studied in terms of content and form; story and discourse. Of particular interest is the interaction between the image of the child (especially of girls), conceptions of childhood/girlhood, and narrative transmission/the literary mode of presentation (narrative structures, techniques, and strategies; rhetorical devices).

As a result, various insights are gained into:

- the thematic range of childhood discourse in the nineteenth century
- the implied images of the child and conceptions of childhood
- the interface between childhood, women, and education
- the implications of various socio-cultural practices (e.g. family life, religious instruction, reading behaviour) for gender and identity
- the emergence of a gender psychology underlying the childhood discourse and the various educational practices
- the interface of female identity formation and childhood (re-)construction
- childhood's contribution to identity
- the discourse of the self and the concept of female identity
- language and gender identity and individual subjectivity
- the interdependence of concepts of identity (biological determinism vs. social constructivism)
- the complex strategies by which subject positions are established and communicated
- the significant interplay of culture, gender, identity and genre
- the ideology of genre
- the relationship between discourse and counter-discourse

Treating childhood in this way – as a major key to central issues of a whole age and culture – leads to a more differentiated assessment of the nineteenth century at large, which complements and modifies the evidence conveyed through other forms of nar-

2 These are: Amelia Opie, Dorothea Herbert, Mary Martha Sherwood, Mary Somerville, Lady Caroline Lamb, ‘Charlotte Elizabeth’ Tonna, Anna Jameson, Mary Howitt, Sara Coleridge, Harriet Martineau, Fanny Kemble, Elizabeth Sewell, Frances Power Cobbe, Charlotte M. Yong, and Annie Besant.

rative discourse, e.g. male and female fiction. Additionally, the multiple connections between the historical phenomena studied in this book and the current debates about children, family, upbringing, education, schooling, reading etc. become evident. In other words, larger nineteenth-century concerns as manifest in the representation of childhood and the role and status of children in literature point to significant current societal issues.

Working within the discipline of British Literary Studies (literary theory and criticism, literary history, genre poetics, textual analysis, aesthetics) the present study applies various critical approaches to the texts such as close reading, narratology, deconstruction, contextualization, New Historicism, Gender and Cultural Studies. At the same time, as the children's culture of the nineteenth century is explored here in its various manifestations, the investigation draws on a number of other discourses, such as educational theory, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, medicine, religion, philosophy, history of art, didactics and methodology.

It goes without saying that the subject is very complex and requires scholarly differentiation in various ways. Firstly, this relates to historical and social aspects: the texts subject to a critical rereading here are the product of fifteen women writers. By birth the writers are Romantic and Victorian, but historically the autobiographies belong to the Victorian Age. The autobiographers are far from being ordinary representatives of their sex; some of them even became public figures. There is a huge diversity as to the women's geographical, familial,³ socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. What they have in common is that they belong to the upper and upper-middle classes. This fact is an important prerequisite for the women's access to education and their literary (reading and writing) socialization, as well as their career as writers. Moreover, their childhood accounts document childhood experiences which contain the individual and the exemplary side by side. That is, they are representative of their age and sex in some respects, and are not in others. The texts are treated here as case studies. The investigation explores their past significance and their present meaning, and thus integrates two temporal levels of judgment – the standards of the nineteenth century and of our own time.

Secondly, as to terminology: 'childhood' is used here as a term not in the narrow sense of the age range from babyhood to the beginning of adolescence, but in a broader sense, as extending to youthhood, the time of the girls' marriage or leaving the house. In a more specific sense, because we are dealing with women documenting their childhood experiences, childhood is often used as a contextual synonym for 'girlhood.' Yet because the female autobiographers also deal – explicitly or implicitly – with male childhoods, boyhood and masculinity, and address gender issues beyond femininity, the use of the term 'childhood' in the title seems more appropriate. The

3 Not all of the women writers had a family of their own later on. Herbert, Martineau, Sewell, Cobbe and Yonge did not marry. The others were married. Sherwood, Somerville, Lamb, Howitt, Coleridge, Kemble and Besant had children.

terms childhood ‘account,’ ‘memoirs,’ ‘reminiscences,’ and ‘narrative’ are, at times, employed interchangeably.

The concept of ‘culture’ underlying this study is that suggested by Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (2001):

If we see culture as ‘the production and circulation of meaning’ then culture is a significant site for the formation of discourses by which one social group or community (a sex, ‘race’, nation or society) legitimates its power over another group or community.

Equally, culture becomes an important place where power, and the meanings that uphold power, can be resisted. (*ibid.*: 25)

One could sum this up by saying that culture as “the practices which produce meaning: signifying practices” (Kramer 1997: 83, based on R. Bocoock 1992: 234)⁴ is the most relevant aspect of culture in this study.

Thirdly, theoretical issues and critical approaches: there is no such thing as ‘the child’ or ‘childhood’ per se to be discovered. The women’s literary renditions of childhood are highly subjective. The images of the child and the conceptions of childhood are constituted through language because representation works through language. In terms of rhetorics, stylistics and narratology, the accounts are very diverse. The women writers employ peculiar narrative strategies in (re-)constructing their childhoods, in (re-)producing and conveying those (self-)images and conceptions, i.e. notions about themselves and childhood in general. A close reading of the texts unmasks the fact that these reconstructions of experiences through writing are (consciously or unconsciously) constructions at the same time, even involving a certain amount of fictionalization. Story and discourse/narrative transmission form an inseparable unit not just in fiction, but also in autobiography. Consequently, the notions expressed about children and childhood, the subjects, themes and topics addressed cannot be studied independently from the way they are linguistically rendered/(re-)constructed. In other words, the specific mode of presentation needs to be investigated as well. As a result, the reader has to keep in mind that when dealing with these issues, we are not judging ‘real’ lives, ‘live’ children/girls or women in history, but we are discussing ‘paper constructs,’ i.e. the autobiographers’ self-fashioned childhood selves. Nonetheless the statements have referential qualities, betray certain features of social reality and social history. The accounts have therefore to be seen as multiply refracted representations (retrospective view, pattern of a *life* projected onto a life, forms of self-censorship, transformation of fact into fiction, various authentication strategies), as highly sophisticated and at times partly also contradictory, or at least ambiguous, inscriptions of the self. The complex meanings encoded in the women writers’ texts allow for varied practices of decoding on the part of today’s readers. This is no simple matter of comparing lives and *lives* in order to judge ‘truth.’ The only kind of ‘truth’ involved in autobiography – if at all – is artistic/emotional/psychological authenticity.

4 R. Bocoock (1992), “The Cultural Formations of Modern Society”, in S. Hall *et al.*, eds., *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 229-68.