

Childhood narrative

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Sam Ferguson (trad.)

Definition and specificities

We will here address the childhood narrative only in its autobiographical dimension, whether this constitutes an autonomous whole or is included within an autobiography that extends beyond the author's childhood. That said, "the nominal identity that joins the child and the narrator is almost always the subject of uncertainty : one no longer recognises oneself in the child one was ; and often (in Sartre's *Les Mots* [*The Words*] as well as in Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* [*If it Die*]), one no longer wants to have been that child, and even less to become that child again through the game of writing" (see Jacques Lecarme, "La légitimation du genre"). Indeed, it is possible to evoke childhood in a mode of rupture, and the childhood narrative can then become a matter of settling scores : this is the case for Sartre, but also for Stendhal in his *Vie de Henry Brulard* [*The Life of Henry Brulard*] ; it is also possible to establish a relationship of symbiosis or happy nostalgia with one's childhood (Colette in *Sido* or Anatole France in *Le Livre de mon ami* [*My Friend's Book*]). The duration of childhood varies according to the author and the period : some authors base the periodisation of their life on the divisions created by schooling (Sarraute brings *Enfance* [*Childhood*] to an end with Natacha's entry into secondary school) ; others consider that childhood ends with the signs of puberty (Catherine Millet, in the last section of *Une enfance de rêve* [*A Dream Childhood*], emphasizes the protagonist's first menstruation, and Marie Sizun, in *Éclats d'enfance* [*Shards of Childhood*], makes the "frightening and sumptuous blood of menstruation" signify "the end of childhood") ; for Marcel Arland (*Terre natale* [*Native Land*]) and Emmanuel Roblès (*Jeunes saisons* [*Young Seasons*]), it is the confrontation with death and the disappearance

of a beloved grandmother that sounds the death knell of childhood ; for Pierre Loti (*Le Roman d'un enfant* [*The Story of a Child*]), it is the act of taking his destiny in hand and affirming his vocation as a sailor : "it seems to me that my early childhood really came to an end that day when I thus decided my future." There are texts focused exclusively on childhood that exclude any proleptic looks towards the future (Marcel Pagnol in *La Gloire de mon père* [*My Father's Glory*]) and texts that feature a back and forth between the narration of childhood and its echoes in the adult's life : "The most distinctive features of a character are formed and appear before we become aware of them. But could I have understood the meaning of what was taking shape within me ?" (Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt*).

The childhood narrative has a particular status within the autobiographical project. Because memory is incomplete, surely there is a reinvention of the past ? A notable characteristic of the recollection of childhood is "the shakiness of memory" (Philippe Lejeune, *Les Brouillons de soi*). A specialist in childhood memory, Richard Coe, points out that the distinction between "fiction" and "diction", which is valid for narratives of adult life, is more problematic in childhood narratives. Some autobiographers integrate this uncertainty into their childhood narratives, expressing their scruples and doubts : this gives rise to a veritable "hygiene of suspicion" (Lejeune, *ibid.*), which is practised by Stendhal in his *Vie de Henry Brulard* and Georges Perec in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* [*W, or the Memory of Childhood*].

Another possible characteristic of the childhood narrative is the device of fresh perspective, by which some autobiographers convey the ingenuity of the protagonist through the latter's questioning relationship with "grown-ups", and their perplexed view of things. In different cases the adoption of such a perspective may give the narrative a gentle humour (Anatole France's *Le Livre de mon ami*) or a more biting irony (Pierre Gripari's *Pierrot la lune* [*Pierrot the Moon*]).

Finally, we cannot neglect the importance of literary models in childhood narratives – influencing the composition of accounts of early experience for which memory sometimes fails – especially as school literature has enthusiastically seized upon certain texts to make them into anthology pieces : depending on the generation in question, texts by Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Colette, Pagnol, Sarraute, or Perec will have played their part as models. There are also certain commonplaces and recurring sequences, including the fragile first memory, the first marvels, portraits of parents, school scenes, first readings, the first operation – from Michel Leiris to Mathieu Lindon the removal of tonsils occupies a special place – the first stirrings of a poorly understood desire, and the discovery of cinema. But it is undoubtedly this common palette of memory that draws readers to childhood narratives.

Landmarks in the history of the genre

In the history of French-language self-writing, a crucial landmark is that of Rousseau's work, which overturned people's earlier conception of childhood. Book I of the *Confessions* (1782) deals in a serious manner with the role of the earliest affective states in the formation of an individual and with childhood sexuality. This shocked contemporary readers who were unprepared for such a discourse. In the case of Stendhal, the childhood narrative occupies half of the *Vie de Henry Brulard* (published posthumously in 1890). In this work, the story itself of an unhappy childhood in Grenoble is less important than Stendhal's approach to recounting it, which is full of doubt and restrictions : we have now left behind Rousseau's full confidence in his recollection of childhood memories. To speak of one's childhood in the nineteenth century, and to do so when one is a woman, is to be doubly suspected of "triviality" (Louise Michel, *Mémoires*). If the childhood narrative still has little legitimacy at this time, the narrative of a female childhood has even less. However, some women (George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie* [*Story of My Life*] [1854-1855] and Louise Michel, *Mémoires* [1886]) did venture into this area, depicting their childhood as a time of relative freedom before the constraints of adulthood, and not hesitating to call on their female readers to become aware of the enforced and alienating course of a woman's life.

It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the autobiographical childhood narrative acquired its autonomy. Whereas it had initially been part of a whole – albeit potentially an essential part, as in Book I of Rousseau's *Confessions* – it became a whole in itself, intended for an adult reader (Loti, *Le Roman d'un enfant*, 1890). At the beginning of the twentieth century another major event occurred in the history of the childhood narrative : the Freudian revolution. Freud claims in *Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood* (1910) that, "unlike the conscious memories of adulthood, [our childhood memories] do not become fixed, do not arise from the event itself, but are only evoked later, when childhood has already passed, and then modified, distorted, placed in the service of later tendencies : in such a way that they cannot, in general, be distinguished very well from fantasies". Although Freud shows the fragility of childhood memory, he also stresses its essential role : "one might have thought that psychoanalysis would kill off the classical childhood narrative. The opposite happened : by attributing a decisive importance to the first years of life, it gave this type of narrative a scientific legitimacy" (Lejeune, "L'Enfance fantôme"). Throughout the twentieth century the childhood narrative came to be widely practised : although certain writers of the inter-war period expressed their contempt for it (Alain, *Histoire de mes pensées* [*A History of My Thoughts*], 1936 : "Of childhood, I shall say little ; for it was nothing but stupidity. I imitated, I recited, I played, I read […]. So a silly childhood, as they all are"), others provided it with its let-

ters of nobility. In *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926), Gide evokes a solitary childhood marked by the torments of desire ; in *La Maison de Claudine* [*The House of Claudine*] (1922) and *Sido* (1929), Colette relates, in fragmented forms full of ellipses and evasiveness, her life between the ages of eight and twelve, which was a determining moment in the genesis of her personality and a decisive period from which she drew her nourishing substance ; Leiris's *L'Âge d'homme* [*Manhood*] (1939), undertaken after a psychoanalytic treatment, is composed of a montage of childhood memories and dreams related to the author's erotic life and sexual obsessions.

"Since 1945 perhaps, and certainly since 1968, the genre has undergone a process of valorisation" (Lecarme). While some people recount their childhood using dialogue and a continuous narrative, with an undeniable proximity to the novelistic model (Pagnol, Arland), others emphasise the initiatory dimension of the narrative, which restores, in flashes, a childhood that has to be drawn out of the depths of memory (Ernaux in "Première enfance" ["Early Childhood"], 2001). The childhood narrative, long despised, has become a site of consecration for the writer : this is the consensus and success obtained by Sartre with *Les Mots* (1964), paradoxically, since this work is an autobiography in which he intends to demystify literature, childhood, and the childhood narrative. Could one go so far as to say that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the childhood narrative became an obligatory step in the writer's career ? Even the loose grouping of writers linked to the Nouveau Roman embraced it : this is the case for Sarraute in *Enfance* (1983), Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Le Miroir qui revient* [*Ghosts in the Mirror*] (1985), and Claude Simon in *Le Tramway* [*The Trolley*] (2001), all of which provide proof, if it were needed, of the plasticity of the childhood narrative.

The childhood narrative has become a codified genre, exploited to the point of exhaustion by school literature and the publishing world (there are whole series dedicated to it, such as Gallimard's "Haute Enfance" series), but it has also proved its ability to renew itself and to be the site of literary experimentation, including : the disruption of narrative linearity and placing emphasis on the facts of language (Leiris, *Biffures* [*Scratches*], 1948) ; childhood narrative in verse (Georges Perros's *Une vie ordinaire* [*An Ordinary Life*] [1967], a "novel-poem" written entirely in octosyllables) ; use of the second person (Alain Bosquet, *L'Enfant que tu étais* [*The Child You Were*], 1982) ; use of the third person (Mathieu Lindon, *En enfance* [*In Childhood*], 2009) ; the alternation of authentic memories and fantastical episodes (Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, 1975) ; the dialogical organisation of childhood memories (Sarraute, *Enfance*) ; and the spatial organisation of memories (Marie Sizun, *Éclats d'enfance*, 2009).

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