

Girls are not “ordinary”. Some priorities of contemporary fictional autobiographies of girlhood

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*En décrivant des mémoires d'enfance dans les romans autobiographiques, les auteurs se penchent sur les expériences, les thèmes et les moments de l'enfance, qui ont une signification particulière pour eux et pour la communauté de lecteurs. Certains des romans contemporains qui mettent en scène les mémoires d'enfance, dont les textes de Kate Atkinson *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* et *Cat's Eye* de Margaret Atwood, sont examinés ici à travers la manière dont ils traitent les premiers souvenirs des jeunes filles: leurs fantaisies, leurs perceptions et leurs craintes, la vie à la maison, à l'école, dans leur quartier et leur communauté. Ces modes narratifs reflètent les codes favoris de l'écriture autobiographique, ainsi que les conceptions dominantes de l'enfant et de la petite fille dans la société contemporaine.*

Introduction

Autobiographies can be seen to rewrite culture, since they are always revisions of the past, rewritings, re-appraisals, as described by Jerome Bruner in “The Autobiographical Process”: “in rewriting our autobiographies, we often ‘rewrite culture’ as we rewrite our lives, privileging different conventional turning points such as adolescence or retirement” (40). Life-writing is a revisionist art, since the past does not stand as scientific fact, but rather as something that changes with opinions, experience, point of view, with time and with the writing process itself.

This paper is about rewriting culture by rewriting the self, in the feminine, in the last quarter of the 20th century. It concentrates on autobiographical novels and on female character-narrators retelling their girlhood, drawing on Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Margaret Atwood’s *Cat's Eye* and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. These texts are made representative of a culture that doesn’t stand still, either in time or space, that is not homogeneous, and they are read in this paper as part of a material culture that redefines girlhood. In the background remain the many narrative and cultural patterns of female autobiographies that have become familiar, such as the mother who protects her children, or the apologia of a hard-working life, happy despite poverty of conventional autobiographies that reflect idealised stances of human agency for readers. It is there that one might also find a catalogue of girl life experiences, individual and simultaneously culture-specific.

As a broad encompassing umbrella concept I think that most of us would agree with Jerome Bruner when he contends that “each particular culture favors a canonical form of autobiographical telling that is its own mark” (47). His

statement, however, that “in ours, for example, it is chronological, oriented around emblematic events and ‘stages’ of life, focused on the voyage from the private to the public domain (home to school to work), voluntaristic, and marked by the ‘life crises’” (Bruner 48-49) may be a little more controversial. I am not sure that all contemporary autobiographical narratives rely straightforwardly on the notion of the human active agent or on chronology. I prefer to look at contemporary autobiographies as being organised by “a will to know and a desire to speak” in the words of Rosi Braidotti quoted by Angela McRobbie (67) and also sometimes as challenges to preferred or dominant modes of narrating lives and in particular childhood, or even pointing toward new forms of experiencing/telling lives, to forms of breaking with cultural hegemonies of rewriting the self. In regard to women’s autobiographies in novels, and in particular to those that rewrite girlhood in the novels I chose to highlight there seems to be an effort to redefine the nature and possibilities of the feminine self. Atwood’s, Atkinson’s and Winterson’s novels seem to frame the late twentieth-century social imagination in all its diversity, giving form to the possible, the desirable and the undesirable experiences in the contemporary cultural politics of girlhood. Thus, for the purpose of this paper I will concentrate, after a brief historical overview of girl representations in fiction, on the *technologies of the self* and the *semantics of girlhood* in three movements: how each text conceptually structures the self, how girlhood emerges from the autobiographical treatment and lastly, the secrets and disclosures that go with narrating girlhood in contemporary women’s novelistic fiction.

Having stated my aims, it is also important to clarify what this paper does not attempt to do. “All life-writing (as Virginia Woolf called it) is a paradoxical process whereby the fragmentary business of lived experience is moulded into a formal literary structure and given an artificial sense of direction,” writes Lucasta Miller in *The Brontë Myth* (64). What this paper is not about is the transformation of selves in reality into characters in narratives. The cultural analysis of fictional texts is only about text construction and about how texts construe lives for girls in autobiographical growth processes of women. I shall not be concerned here with “the business of lived experience,” because the life-writing I wish to concentrate on is fictional, dealing in the life of characters. The sense of direction and the structuring of a life into a writerly mould constitute still pertinent reflections to be taken into account while reading and interpreting girl culture from novels.

Neither will this article be concerned with biography as an art, as such, from the point of view of the growth of an artist. Processes of fictionalising the self as young female child and modes of “packaging” the girl in fiction are taken as conventions by which authors and cultures as well as societies aim at defining girls’ roles in society. The novels chosen are examples of a complex modernity that tries to catch up with the experience of growing up as a girl in the 20th century in all its heterogeneity of human experience within the discourse of novelistic life-writing, highlighting diverse sexual orientations, race, cultural and geographical differences as well as manifold social practices.

This article takes fictional narratives as intellectual and creative discourses that not only render contexts of experience and of life as lived concretely by

individuals, but also sometimes aim at transforming reality. Representations of the girl child by the adult in the context of autobiographical novels are part of the transformative and educational force of culture. A novel as symbolic and material resource enables a representation and a criticism of the world. Thus, the changing nature of girl representation in this narrative form is a cultural practice which influences ways of seeing, thinking and framing reality for girls and may also be engaged in the complex transformation of dominant images and messages about girlhood.

The concept of "girl" is in itself quite complex, though taken here predominantly in the sense of child-girls or pre-teen childhood and only incidentally as the passage between puberty and marriage. Girlhood is taken to be a temporary life stage and a learning experience between birth (or pre-birth) and womanhood, thus a stage that emerges fully as category in the last quarter of the 19th century. The interesting features to emphasise in the representation of girlhood since then are the many representations of growing up as a girl and their development across the time/space divide. Growing up a girl, for instance, does not mean nowadays necessarily growing up to become a woman, at least not in that big area of girl representation designed as children's fiction. However, in books that do not fall into that category, girls still grow up to become women and are written from the latter's point of view, as in the novels I have chosen to characterise late 20th century girlhood in autobiographical novels.

Girls in the (life-)writings of women

A brief overview of how women have written about girls will reveal emphases and tendencies of representation that contemporary fiction has inherited and is either happy to accommodate or seeks to refashion. The novelist Elizabeth Bowen argues that "we have relied on our childhoods, on the sensations of childhood, because we mistake vividness with purity" (269), though other authors have found in the revision of girlhood reasons to justify the darker undersides of narrator's personalities, shadows of a former female being in her natural state before the intrusions of nurture, the inner life core before the subject learns to veil it with social mores, the kernel of a sense of consciousness of the self, the beginning of an intellectual or emotional development. Jungian scholars will defend that "rediscovering our childhood is important [...] not so much because it reveals the causes that shaped our behaviour as because it enables us to re-experience and integrate the affectivity linked up with our childhood. Thus we rediscover more completely our sense of innocence and our sense of attachment to our own feelings" (Asper 26). The child within us stands for our innate nature and achieving contact with it lies at the basis of all creative potentialities.

Nineteenth-century fiction, however, such as in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, holds on to the comfortable notion that being immature, a girl will commit mistakes and pursue fancies that she will have to discard once she reaches adulthood and correspondent responsibilities and knowledge of herself in society, even though this knowledge may bring despair and resignation. The younger self that is replaced by a maturer self that looks back in sorrow and nostalgia is

intensely challenged by narratives of the late 20th century. As we will see, the novels of Atkinson, Atwood and Winterson shape girls who are capable of reshaping the world, reinvent themselves, start their identity projects several times over and invent their own paths in life in a multiplicity of selves.

I think it is then safe to contend that most contemporary autobiographical writing about girlhood thus involves recovering lost, silenced, misunderstood or de-valued children's voices in the context of another aim. Life-writing about girlhood by women, even when inspired by experience or based on observation, inescapably relies on a willing (or unwilling) recuperation of children's voices as a means to recreate life affectively. Thus the lives of children and the memories of childhood are often fashioned as areas of obscurity and (noisy) silence that are either brought to light or given a hearing.

The visibility of girls in women's fiction is also essentially connected with sexuality as well as cultural and social challenge. Pre-puberty and puberty girlhood are presented as a period of sexual, social and cultural latency in a world of changing moral and social standards. Take the well-known example of Jane Eyre who, as a child, in the strict Victorian context, rebels against her familiar background (the Reeds), against what is expected of her in terms of age, gender identity and social experience and gets rid of the dominant type of girl-child, innocent, beautiful, passive and saintly. In its stead the narrator frames for her girl-self the path of making choices, define affiliation, challenge morals, shape affections, even if the choices are thought of as socially wrong and definitely against social and novelistic conventions (Ang 38-47). Commenting on later fiction, Lucasta Miller is of the opinion that in the 1920s, "biographers were actively seeking those shadows (anything that might compromise a reputation, the inner life). Aspects of experience which had previously been hidden in silence began to take centre stage, most notably sexuality" (123). In general terms, however, I agree with Penny Brown's argument that "large numbers of women throughout the [19th] century wrote sensitively, poignantly, amusingly, with pity, sympathy and rage, about the delights and miseries of childhood and, like their male counterparts, used the figure of the child as a vehicle for personal, social and spiritual polemic" (2).

The personal, social and spiritual polemic is perhaps more striking in adult fiction, though it is in children's fiction that the visibility of girls became of paramount importance in shaping girls' lives from early on since identities are often shaped also from readings.

Susan Ang argues that *Jane Eyre* is about "discovering the average" and proving it to be "arresting"(43). Small, plain, undistinguished in any sense, Jane proves that a heroine "need not be ravishingly beautiful in order to be interesting". She is an ordinary girl, just like any other and this proves important for later constructions of the child-girl in fictional terms as seen in the still highly popular novel *The Secret Garden* published by Frances Hodgson Burnett's for the first time in 1911.

The ordinary girl-child consistently developed from the late 19th century on in children's fiction (and in particular in girls' fiction) is also a "flawed" child,

challenging, on the one hand, with its non-conformity to expectations, predominant views of the girl and, on the other, signalling that it is from underdevelopment, imperfection, timidity, lack of self-assertion, that a girl can grow into the acceptable roles of "the woman" if educated, cared about, given attention, visibility and a voice.

The fact that the plain and ordinary little girls of adult and girl's fiction co-existed with the beautiful and extraordinary boys of boys' fiction can not be overlooked, since it signals ordinariness as a particular feature of girls in girls' fiction. For girls there were the realistic contexts of domesticity, for the boys, the extraordinary backgrounds. We just have to compare *The Secret Garden* to *Little Lord Fauntleroy* by the same author to recognise that ordinariness and plainness are assets for little girls *only*, since they allow little girls to develop the feminine virtues of patience, caring for others, forbearance and gentleness toward deficiency.

The next stage of girls' images in children's fiction is, according to Judith Rowbotham (34) the tall, sturdy, resilient maidens, rebellious and imaginative, who nonetheless grow up into conventional little women. Maureen S. Reed finds a common pattern in girls' fictions of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, pointing out that "all of the heroines take part in a determined effort to improve themselves as they grow older — they start out as imaginative girls who get into 'scrapes' and grow up to be women who are writers as well as 'models of femininity'" (103). She is referring to Louisa May Alcott, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Lucy Maud Montgomery and their children's fictions based on autobiographical sources, but nonetheless their books set a mode of representation of girls at the outset of the 20th century.

The next significant development which occurred especially after the Second World War concerns heroines becoming, at least in children's fiction series, adventurers into the wide unknown and "thrill seekers," courageous, physically strong, independent, leaders, but inevitably caught within the ambiguity of their greater freedom in patriarchal contexts that still demanded their subordination. In the end, there is "home after wandering," marriage and protection by the male (Romalov 75-88).

Structures of the self

The contemporary semantics of girlhood has to be seen in connection to earlier conventions of representation and as determined by new vocabularies to define what a girl is. The novels by Atkinson, Atwood and Winterson offer us a broad scope of definitions of girl life, though they have also to be considered in relation to their conceptual use of structure and sense of self.

In Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* the expectations of an orderly chronological autobiographical narrative are thwarted by the narrator's incursions into other women's lives through a footnote system that disturbs the chronological development of the I-narrator and the comfort of the reader. The footnotes extend the familial ties of the protagonist to several generations of women that come before her and whose stories are seen to leave fragments in the

present, offering the narrator alternative readings of self-representation. Being part of a broad family and of a web of many narratives, the narrator accepts each particular incident or experience and its own story as part of her own life — and tells it in the first or in the third person. Thus, the text reverberates with the narratives of others, family stories, old photographs, anecdotes of female ancestors.

Margaret Atwood's autobiographical novel *Cat's Eye* engages with a complex flexible dimension of time, a dimension of the past that can exist simultaneously with the present, which is explained in the following terms: "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (1). In this perspective, the self cracks into layers of selves and into fragments of each self: the self conjured up at a certain point, the one before, the one after. "There is never only one, of anyone" (6). And anyone is more than just one person. Elaine Risley's girlhood is that of the girl Elaine and of her girlfriends Cordelia, Grace and Carol. The past and the structure of the novel are discontinuous, "like stones skipped across water, like postcards. I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a blank" (302), confirming the idea of a multiple self and a life in fragments. The self remains open to transformation through the autobiographical writing process. We can trace the hesitations of writing the "real me" and the favouring of diverse, intense cultural crossover or fragile, hybrid identities in place of a full subjectivity of a fully coherent selfhood or biographical continuity, as described by Angela McRobbie in relation to the postmodern autobiographical I. (192)

This concept of multiple selves promotes a weaving of alternative stories to the one that seems inevitable. Take as an example the time when the child Ruby tells herself a story, in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, in order to seek refuge from a bad mother, a mother capable of hissing back at her eldest daughter that she doesn't like children. This is one of the stories Ruby tells herself as a child:

I am not very happy, but I have decided to make the best of things. I've been given the wrong mother and am in danger of embarking on the wrong life but I trust it will be all sorted out and I will be reunited with my real mother — the one who dropped ruby-red blood onto a snow-white handkerchief and wished for a little girl with hair the colour of a shiny jet-black raven's wing. (43)

Ruby reinvents her mother and reinvents herself as a precious gem. "I am a precious jewel. I am a drop of blood. I am Ruby Lennox" (382). Her self is genealogically built through the lives of other women of her family, but also geologically, as of a precious stone, a gem with many strata on which the experiences of her female ancestors are carved.

As already pointed out, Ruby rethinks and reshapes the negative mother daughter relationship into some positive set of emotions, a story about new identities. Similarly, when faced with nightmares of drowning, she tells her Teddy bear stories about a rescuing like Rapunzel, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Robin Hood, Simbad the Sailor, Lone Ranger.

The common lore of childhood evoked by Ruby could just serve fantasy and escape and signal the inability of the girl to cope with reality. However, for the heroine of *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* fairy stories are literature of advice, warnings against terrible conspiracies to force women, in all innocence, into marriage with beasts, as in "Beauty and the Beast" and "Little Red Riding Hood" (72).

The novel by Jeanette Winterson uses the past and the present as parallel dimensions. "There's a chance that I'm not here at all, that all the parts of me, the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other" (169), we hear. Caught between the evangelist in the north and the self that went away, modelled by the books of the Bible and by the plots of fairy tales rewritten to suit her different sexuality, Jeanette writes herself as an adopted child, an invented child, a missionary child, blessed *and* cursed, a little lily *and* a house of demons, a schoolgirl that tries to make herself as ordinary as possible and nonetheless is accused of terrorising other children, a bully *and* a child apart, describing the relation between the narrator and the child as a move across time. "I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been" (169).

The ability to hold on to the past as a parallel dimension to the present is quite characteristic of the autobiographical fiction of the second half of the 20th century. It seems to be related to the by now famous quote from L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go Between* that "the past is a different country. They do things differently there." Not only is it a different one, but in these novels it has become a parallel country, a country of possibilities that might have been.

The power of world construction and of structuring the self into a writerly mould is central to the shaping of the many-layered self, which is perceived in these novels through short units, fragments of experiences, paintings, flashes of recognition, episodes, little objects that hold keys to the past and fears, dangerous thoughts, dreams, shadows that lie buried waiting to be exhumed.

Girls are not ordinary

Measured against preferred or dominant notions of the "girl", these autobiographical novels announce the impossibility of the girls to fit into "the ordinary": Jeanette in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* not only has difficulty in accepting that she is not as sweet as expectations concerning little girls demand her to be (71). She is an outsider at school because of her religious upbringing and a "demon" in her own family and religious sect because of her so-called "unnatural passions" for girls. Her religious single-minded mother sees as "a wilful act on the daughter's part to sell her soul" (128). Thus, it constitutes a voluntary steak to shape her life in the margins of socially acceptable behaviour.

In Elaine's case, in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, learning to become a "conventional" girl is a difficult experience. Kept from the society of little girls Elaine is a late comer to school. When she discovers the unknown world of girls, she finds that what is expected of her is to have things, clothes, to sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the Eaton's catalogue with embroidery scissors and to

say what she does not believe in an extravagant and mocking way (54). It is to learn to reproduce the slippery deceitful smiles of her girlfriends and their cynicism, to be cruel and mean. Girl malice, a mixture of fake kindness, indifference and harshness is destructive for the girl Elaine, who bites fingers, peels feet and feels abnormal, miserable, alien, apprehensive with fear of her best friends and their meanness. The ordinariness of little girls, their little ways accepted by and acceptable for adults lead Elaine into self-destructive behaviour till the moment she decides to give up following and accepting the ways of "girls like her".

Ruby of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* feels trapped in the many unwritten and unspoken rules that are revealed to her at random, "only yesterday I learnt that girls shouldn't sit with their legs crossed (this from George) (her father) and that the Labour Party is more dangerous than the Catholic Church (from Bunt) (her mother)" (172). Her flight from ordinary behaviour relies heavily on words. There is only sense in words, the words she is able to shape for herself. "In the end, it is my belief, words are the only things that can construct a world that makes sense," (382) she writes. And it is through writing that Ruby is able to deal with the others' representation of her as a freak: the twin who murdered her sister. It is also through words and their power to reshape life and bring to the surface what is hidden beneath that she is able to recover those parts of her self, or those selves, that she has locked away in trauma.

Objects and selves

There is little purity and much vividness in remembered childhood for the girls' lives in these three narratives are part of tales of empowerment.

"I have lived a privileged life, I've never been beaten up, raped, gone hungry," (378) writes painter Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, summing up her childhood, though part of this story must also involve a mixed sense of victory and shame. Elaine feels an adult in disguise. Childhood memories are triggered by her return in middle age to Toronto to a retrospective exhibition of her paintings, "a public face," which is an accomplishment: "I have made something of myself, something or other, after all" (21). Compared to this self, girlhood is the place of gaiety, invention, imperviousness and scintillation, of the attraction of sibling conspiracy and collusion and "an old rootless life of impermanence and safety" (33). It is however, also, when looked at on its own, the origin of her nothingness, her sense of wrongness, awkwardness, weakness, of the wish to be loved, of loneliness and of fear. Old women, according to the narrator, can play again like children, though this time without the pain. Little girls hurt each other badly when they play.

Sometimes girls become visible in the life-writings of women narrators as empowering fantasies of how they became what they are, what they had to struggle against in that process of becoming someone else. At other times, theirs is a tale of resignation, of fitting their selves into accepted society moulds. It is the case of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, in which growing up is to learn how to behave and how to think, how to get rid of the "funkiness," "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human

emotions" (64). Passion, nature and emotions have to fit into the categories of what is acceptable in the girl's and the narrator's family, community and society. That is why the book reads as being about the soiling of pure emotions, natural instincts and passions, how beauty, thriving on envy and insecurity, on relations of power and on arbitrary associations becomes disillusion and madness; how love becomes possessive mating and destructive (95). How passions (like beauty) can be crushed to give place to respectability and generate hatred and fear of life (100).

Though none of the autobiographies we are considering deny that growing up is giving in to societal pressures, they nonetheless hold on to the view that in childhood there lie valuable emotions, if not necessarily genuine, one should not let go of. And this is often symbolically rendered as holding on to some object (or idea), which becomes a narrative motif. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a narrative about pain, treachery and betrayal in the dense languages of the Bible, Jeanette doesn't give up her "demon," her "orange demon." Her tormentors are not little girls as in *Cat's Eye*, or the bad mothering and loss of sisters as in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, but the sexual instincts and attitudes of a girl that go against her mother's plans to make her a missionary and against society's conventions and expectations regarding sexual mores. The mother-child relation of nurturance and community is crucial for the depiction of the loss of religious faith, the inability to forgive, the growing loss of a sense for living that arise from the child's resistance to mother, church and society.

In the other novels resistance may not be as exemplary as it is in Winterson's narrative, but it manifests itself symbolically through treasured objects that are kept safe in and through time. A chest, a drawer, a pocket are favourite hiding places. Where Elaine held on to a beautiful cat's eye marble as a symbol for her positive self, beautiful and victorious, Jeanette substitutes the oranges her mother gave her as appeasement and reward by a little brown pebble, symbolic of her anger and stubbornness, and Ruby, in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, not only holds on to several memorabilia to tell the story of her engagement with her past, but when her sister Patricia tells her almost at the end of the novel, that "the past is what you leave behind in life," she also retorts that "the past's what you take with you" (381). "I have been to the world's end and back and now I know what I would put in my bottom drawer. I would put my sisters" (338). What you hide is one of the selves you want to hold on to.

Disclosure and Disguise

Hiding and disguising are also key features of these autobiographical novels as if memories were synonymous to darkness, depths of self, the unconscious, the attics and cellars of houses. One could argue along with Jerome Bruner that the self demands a complex mixture of disclosure and disguise from personal mythologies and fantasies(52). The perspective of adults when they remember their pasts is often matched with the uncovering of secrets, silences and hesitations. I think most would agree that to represent their lives in terms of mysteries and secrets is conventionally a good feminine plot of women's fictions.

Hesitations, however, have to be explained in a different way. According to Linda Anderson, the pain and the affectivity that involve autobiographical renderings are key factors for women to “re-inscribe their gender in their texts (200-205). Their voices are not weighed down by the burden of authoritative certainty; their memories bear the marks and gaps of silence; their pasts are only tentatively accessed.” I would add that past selves are invited to co-exist with the present selves), for women autobiographers do not generally aim just at getting to know themselves better or “probing the inner recesses of the psyche.” They engage with their other selves, the selves they have left behind, those they have hidden away out of fear, pain or resilience.

This is one of the narrative meanings of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. Ruby has strange intimations of another presence, of a shadow self: “as if my shadow’s stitched to my back, almost as if there’s someone else in here with me” (15). “Here there and everywhere, I don’t know how I move so fast — one moment I am standing by the television set, the next I’m hurtling through the passage to the kitchen. If you blinked you’d almost think there was two of me” (43). The words acknowledge an identity problem, which is kept hidden from the reader for a long time, forcing him/her to wonder why Ruby has this split personality problem. The solution of the riddle comes with the unveiling of a dead twin-sister, the existence of which we only learn toward the end of the novel.

For the female autobiographer, her girl self isn’t something to be left behind or kill in order to give way to the adult woman. She hides her treasures to uncover them and bring them back to life by writing her self. She wishes to interpret the girl, to dialogue with her, to care for her, to recover the objects she has hidden away in her secret places, her chest of drawers, her unconscious. Autobiographies thus become tales of “how I care for myself,” how I care for the multiple selves I am, including my child self, as argued by Nikolas Rose (135). *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, for example, is a symbolic form of healing, of restoration for the narrator of some sense of positive selfhood through life-writing. Through psychoanalysis and through writing her life, after a failed suicide attempt, Ruby remembers the existence her twin sister and the trauma of her death. The affectivity linked up with childhood is re-experienced and integrated in her growing sense of identity, enabling her to crave again for life.

But affectivity is also often linked with the recovery of lost, silenced, misunderstood or de-valued children’s voices and uncovering areas of (noisy) silence. At one level, there are those things that societies keep from children, and that the latter deal in anyway. Sexuality is an example: “a long whisper runs among us, from child to child, gathering horror,” (94) we read about body functions and body growth in *Cat’s Eye*.

At another level there may be cryptic incidents, for the reader, because the narrator refuses to clarify them and holds on to the child’s point of view, as in chapter four of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, when five-year-old Ruby finds herself living with Aunt Babs and her two twin daughters she is frightened of. On Sunday, at the “Church of the Spirit” she is told by a dead person: “Your sister says not to worry about her,” the Minister tells her. Ruby is puzzled, wondering which

of her sisters, Patricia and Gillian, is dead, for she is as yet unable to recognize, and us, readers, with her, that her twin sister is dead and trying to communicate with her through the spirit world.

At a third level these novels uncover secrets, cruel and violent experiences of girls that go unnoticed by parents and society at large. In *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* Jeanette describes behaviour at school in appalling terms: "we flapped along twisting each others' fingers off and promising untold horrors as soon as the lesson was over. Tired of being bullied, I became adept at inventing the most fundamental tortures under the guise of sweet sainthood" (33). One paragraph dismisses that which is the central torture of the girl Elaine in *Cat's Eye*. For nine-year-old Elaine of *Cat's Eye* the perverse games of her best friends almost end in her physical and mental annihilation, an escapade into nothingness, though at the last moment she decides to forget, "to make people appear and vanish, at will" (322). The girls that haunt her become names in a footnote and she reinvents herself as "the sort of girl that (does not) have bad times" (who has) "good times only," (201) which means she develops a small, mean voice, she hardens, she learns to be sly-eyed and calculating, she learns not to look, not to hear, not to see, to close herself off, to conform to the adult narrator's words that "young women need unfairness, it's one of their few defences. They need their callousness, they need their ignorance. They walk in the dark, along the edges of high cliffs, humming to themselves, thinking themselves invulnerable" (365).

Finally, disguises and hiding reinforce the idea of discordance, of the extraordinary plight of each girl. The narrating voice observes and re-lives obscure but meaningful events in the girl's life in order to reveal a self in hiding, most of the times a terrible spectre of the narrator herself when young, of which she is simultaneously afraid and proud of: Jeanette's dreams in childhood about not bearing the idea of marriage (to men), or her fictionalising herself as a princess unable to marry the prince. Ruby's ignoring of her twin sister's existence and death and also her ignorance of the fact of being suspected of having murdered her; Elaine's secret about the savagery and treacherous little girls that nearly drive her to commit suicide.

Conclusion

To conclude, writing about their selves as girls could be interpreted as a rescue strategy for women characters as autobiographers, a reclaiming of a part of the self, or of a self among many, that had been left uncared for. Remembering becomes, as bell hooks once commented, "a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments," "of the bits and pieces of my heart" that the narrative made whole again in its layered disposition.(1036-1039)

These fictional narratives thus confirm Elspeth Probyn's argument that one way of imagining the gendered self is "to think of it as a combination of acetate transparencies: layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be rearranged again" (1). The many phases and periods of girlhood constitute some of these layers. They are not reflections of the narrator's "I", but places from which she speaks personally and socially as adult

woman and as girl, emphasising the historical, social, contextual and personal conditions involved in the latter's speech.

Sometimes there is struggle, when the narrator's selves struggle with their other selves to say something. Thus, we hear the narrator's different voices, her process of practising versions of her self and essaying ways to reach out to them. Some other times we witness an imaginary recovery of one of the narrator's discarded selves as girl, accompanied by dialogue, negotiation and translation, through which the past and the girl become accessible and imaginable in the present and for the future. Though the recuperation of the narrator's self(ves) as girl may also be immersed in the language of social criticism and determine plots of unveiling that which lies under cover or affirming and bringing to light that which has been negated for a long time.

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