

CHILDHOOD AND SELF IN EVA FIGE'S *LITTLE EDEN*

Aranzazu Usandizaga
Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

After spending some time reading autobiography, I can confirm of the extraordinary growth of creative and critical work on the subject, and of the increasing interest of both readers and writers in self-reflexive texts. What until recently was a minor and undefined literary genre has become so important in terms of actual productions and reception that it seems that taking it seriously into account is inevitable. But the theoretical problems any rigorous discussion of the genre suggests are very complex ¹, and they lead directly to the main current debates on the notions of fictionality, on the uses of memory and on the fundamental roles attributed to language. It is a discussion that must face the most basic critical questions of our culture is asking itself in relation to any imaginative and creative use of language. Since the theory of autobiography cannot establish a clear way of limiting the borderline between truth and fiction, in many ways autobiography shares the fundamental critical problems inherent in the understanding of all fictional writing. One of these problems, and a particularly relevant one to autobiography, is that of identity, and here again, in view of the current philosophical discussion surrounding the notions of individuality and identity, the critic is faced with a set of questions that may undermine the very consistency of the subject discussed. But in spite of all these theoretical difficulties in understanding and defining the genre, the fact is that there remain a large number of autobiographical texts waiting to be understood and explained, and the critic must try to tackle them no matter how shaky the theoretical support may be. On the other hand, the higher the number of carefully examined texts, the nearer we may be to establishing a theoretical framework.

The discussion is further complicated by the fact that so many recent autobiographical texts are written by women. Both as readers and writers, women are becoming passionately involved in trying out possible models of identity in autobiography. The reasons for this are many, and feminist

1.-Olney, James, ed. *Studies in Autobiography*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 1988. This is a very recent collection of essays usefully summarizes the discussion.

criticism, particularly American criticism, is becoming increasingly interested in analysing them, because these texts are highly relevant to an understanding of the culture of women. American feminist critics are indeed working hard in the area of woman's autobiography. In 1986 professor Estelle C. Jelinek published her research of many years on the subject, and her book *Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* ² locates and summarizes most of the autobiographical texts written by women of classical, European and English cultures until the nineteenth century, and American autobiographies until the present. Jelinek's book proves that, in spite of the effort of feminist publisher's today in reviving women's texts, there are still many valuable, forgotten autobiographies. Professor Jelinek and other scholars also prove a more important point: that the poetics of woman's autobiography has its own specific features, so much so, that in describing women's autobiographies, feminist critics suggest it may be possible to speak of a tradition of their own. ³

What women seek in the writing and reading of autobiographical narratives is, for the most part, feminine plots, imaginative projections of possible identity models. In her book *Writing Beyond the Ending* ⁴, Rachel Blau du Plessis discusses the limitations of women's plots in the English XIXth century tradition of narrative and fiction, and the many different ways in which women have tried to break these limits to incorporate possible alternative plots in their narratives. It is generally agreed upon that women have dared to be most outspoken in expressing their concerns when fictionalizing imaginative versions of possible selves than when writing straightforwardly about their own real experiences, and it is not until the XXth century and until the past few decades of the century, that women writers of autobiography have begun to discuss openly many of their hitherto hidden and disguised preoccupations. Women writers of fiction have also, only recently, begun to systematically write plots that continue "beyond the ending", that is to say, beyond the traditional endings which turned the hero's possible destinies into the limited destinies of a heroine, and ended all possibility of experience for its feminine characters, either by marrying the character off, or else by sentencing it to death. Women readers and writers of today are eagerly looking for alternative models to those offered by the well known traditional fictional or autobiographical feminine identities, but often find that, until recently, women writers of autobiography have not been able to supply them, and that their texts have often found different ways of

2.-Twayne Publishers, 1986.

3. -This is argued by Sidonie Smith, *The Poetics of Women's Autobiography* and also by Mason and Spacks.

4.-Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985.

evading the obvious risks of presenting models of identity unacceptable to the dominant culture.

The genre of autobiography requires by definition a close responsibility to truth, and women have had to find ways of escaping the dangerous confrontation of open self expression in an unsympathetic social and cultural context. One of the more obvious and more general ways of achieving this almost impossible task has been for the writer to limit her autobiographical story to the description of childhood, a time in which the gender roles are not as rigorously fixed as they will become in adulthood. In her recent article "Woman's Autobiographical Writings: New Forms" ⁵ Carolyn G. Heilbrun points out that the freedom of childhood leaves room for many women writers of the past to dream and imagine a self uncommitted to the social rules of gender distinction. The choice of the woman writer of autobiography to concentrate on childhood is often the case even with outstanding contemporary women novelists. American writers such as Mary McCarthy or Eudora Welty, and English writers such as Rebecca West and Antonia White ⁶, for example, all of them perfectly capable of creating adult fictional characters, limit their autobiographical experience to their childhood.

Of course, childhood is not exclusively a subject of woman's autobiography. In her book *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*, Susanna Egan ⁷ refers to how Freud and Erikson classify the developing forms of mental life into "patterns of experience", so that the autobiographer necessarily adjusts his or her experience to the mental patterns of childhood, adolescence, middle-life, etc. Perception of the self is thus determined by psychological imperatives which are shared with the reader. As regard the "mental patterns" of childhood, it was Wordsworth who turned the idealised nostalgia for the loss of it into a permanent metaphor, and established the fruitful identification between childhood and paradise. Rousseau contributed importantly to turning childhood into a central literary subject for the first time during the XIXth century. P.M. Spacks further suggests ⁸ that each century becomes imaginatively involved with a different period of the life cycle, and if the XVIIIth century favoured maturity and the XXth

5.-In *Modern Selves, Essays in Modern British and American Autobiography*, Frank Cass, 1986.

6.-Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Harvard University Press, 1984, Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, Virago, London 1987. Antonia White, *As Once in May: The Early Autobiography of Antonia White and Other Writings*, Virago 1983.

7.-Egan, Susanna. *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984.

8.-Spacks, P.M., "Stages of the Self. Notes on Autobiography and the Life Cycle", in *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Albert E. Stone, pp. 44-60, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1981.

adolescence, childhood attracts the XIXth century imagination and becomes one of its central metaphors and concerns. But the poetics of women's autobiography explains the reasons for the recurrence of the pattern of childhood in women's autobiography well beyond the XIXth century.

If it continues to be common for contemporary women writers of autobiography to restrict their own stories to the mental pattern of childhood beyond our expectations as XIXth century readers, this is also at first sight the case with Eva Fige's *Little Eden, A child at War*⁹, where the author refers exclusively to her experiences in England during the Second World War, in fact to one single year of her life during the war, to 1940. Yet, what I want to argue about this book is its exceptionality, for, contrary to the argument discussed so far in relation to women's autobiographical texts, Fige's use of childhood does not represent an escape from the writer's responsibility to express her most intimate self, but a commitment to discovering the origins of the self's awakening in childhood to its more permanent values. If in most autobiographies by women, childhood has been the excuse to evade the gender's difficulties at mature self-expression, in *Little Eden* we find one of the first examples of an interpretation of childhood profoundly connected to adulthood, for we encounter childhood understood as the source of adult's most radical and intense vision. Figes' is not one more nostalgic story about an idealised past in which the writer feels the loss of an eden. She is careful to call her story "little eden", and though hers is obviously a lost eden as well, the author does not emphasize its loss as much as its permanence, because it is in that little eden where she was initiated into her great wisdom, where she was able to discover herself in the world.

Figes does not explicitly choose to go back to her childhood, and it is almost by chance that her childhood encounters her, so that she is suddenly made aware of a hardly remembered past. Other XXth. century writers of autobiography use this resource, and like Rebecca West, for instance in *Family Memories*¹⁰, Eva Figes finds herself unexpectedly driving through familiar and almost forgotten territory. Her return to the past is felt as a rediscovery made possible by suddenly "driving into a dream" (p.7), a dream that recurs from then on and is finally understood as a revelation, an epiphany. Then the author finally decides to go back, and walks "into a sanctuary of the past as though into a church", and adds, "and I responded to the atmosphere of what was for me, just then, a holy place" (p.9). The religious references at the end of her brief introduction to her story indicate the relevance of the experience to her. The holiness of the place where she is

9.-Figes, Eva, *Little Eden, A Child at War*, Faber and Faber. London and Boston 1978, All quotations from this text will indicate the corresponding page at the end of the quotation.

10.-op. cit. pg.

recovering from oblivion must be understood in relation to the lasting value of the events lived in that place to her later life.

The Unger family, consisting of Finges, her parents and brother, a family of German Jews, flee to London a year before the war and leave behind what to the child seems a past of comfort and apparent coherence in Berlin, only made possible by hiding the horrors of pre-war Germany from the children. In spite of exile, relative poverty, and eventual war, London life affords unexpected satisfactions to the little girl. For one thing it allows the children to see a lot more of their mother than they did in Germany, and they are of course much freer without the attention of family and servants.

But the great experiences of her life, her reason for writing the book, will take place one year later, in 1940, the year she spends at the town of Cirencester, where her father's volunteer Pioneer Corps is at the time located, and where the mother decides to remain temporarily for reasons of safety. At Cirencester, Finges discovers realms of experience that deserve the transcendental metaphors she uses. Her discoveries are worked out in all their dialectical complexity, allowing for their internal contradictions to play themselves out against each other, and are also contrasted to other experiences and events. The result is the evocation a rich background, and of events which allow for the eventual awakening of the girl to life and vocation, to an "opening of doors" (p.138) to growth and creativity. If as Freud and psychoanalysis suggest, the present can only be explained by reference to the past, this very important period of the author's past becomes the source of future personal wisdom, and is, thus, holy.

Rural refugee life in a town extraordinarily rich in tradition and history becomes the background of the child's awakening to maturity and creativity. Figes did a considerable amount of research into the political, historical and social background of Cirencester, from its Roman past until the war which she relates at length in her book, to the point of recording all kind of anecdotes connected to the town's political and cultural past. She uses all this rich information to solidify the basis of her story, and to confirm that a rich cultural collective experience favors the kind of tolerance needed for psychological survival. The horrors of the present war stand as a sharp contrast to the town's relatively peaceful history. But her research also turns the book into a source of information and into an extraordinary report about the effects of war in a small traditional English town. As is common in autobiographies written by women, the search for identity is considerably widened by the author's interests in the background. In *Little Eden*, Figes insists in presenting a self which can only be understood in the context of its background, so that the background becomes a total relevance to the girl's story, and the writer pays to it the attention an important character deserves in a story. The extension of identity links Finges' text to the tradition of women's self-reflexive writing. Feminist critics explain the difference of

women's attitude to the self as determined by women not having fully shared in the Western tradition of individuality.

The self is first stimulated by the unknown pleasures of rural life when the two children and their mother live on a farm. In her ever dialectical presentation of experience the child's pleasures in the discovery of natural life are balanced by her awareness of her mother's uneasiness. There are of course many reasons for the mother's unhappiness, and though at this particular moment the farmer's bossy wife makes her life uncomfortable, her more permanent uneasiness has to do with her condition as a Jewish immigrant alone in a foreign country, worrying about her relatives' destiny in Germany. Figes is very fair in understanding the sources of her mother's unhappiness, but she is also very clear about the child's alienation from her. Her whole story is about the unexpected fact that the writer finds her eden away from her mother and her home, in the boarding school she attends for over a year in the town of Cirencester when the mother decides to go back to London alone and leave the children at the Cirencester school, a far safer place than London during the war. Yet, what is, remarkably, absent from the text is a sense of involvement or guilt on the writer's part as regards her relationship to her mother.

School is the central event in the writer's life and in the book. It will allow for the miracle of intellectual awakening and of affectionate understanding. If rural life on the Cirencester farm was orchestrated against a background of urban life, the very old-fashioned unsystematic school she and her brother attend is inevitably compared by the child to the London institution of their first year of exile. She remembers her struggle to adapt to the London children, and the useless order and system of institutionalised teaching in London, which had not appealed to her imagination. The Cirencester school is an unusual centre run by two apparently eccentric unmarried sisters, the inheritors of an Edwardian culture, in which there is room for freedom, self-confidence and self-fulfilment. It is in this school, overcome by hunger and chilblains, -for the sisters feed and warm their pupils very poorly-, that she is allowed access to the school's open library where she can read freely and avidly, and where she is taught to watch and understand the natural processes of life. In an atmosphere of spontaneous affection and respectful love she discovers her passion for books and her desire to write. School becomes, in spite of its lack of comfort, a perfect substitute for the home, the place where affection never becomes possessive, and where her unknown creative powers can freely emerge.

Other aspects of school experience collaborate in determining her early identity, for at school she naturally engages in the intricacies of relationship, not only with the members of the older generation, but also more importantly, with her contemporaries, with other pupils of the school, and her friend Isolde becomes a determining character in her story. Like the

rest of experiences and events in her life, Isolde's friendship is complex. Though the narrator often finds in Isolde a sharply critical friend, Isolde can share with the writer her passion for books and her dream of becoming a writer. Isolde's response to the narrator's early written material turns her into the writer's first critic, and her serious reception of her first material adds to the young girl's self-esteem, and allows her to think of herself as a potential writer.

Isolde is also responsible for awakening the narrator's self to its more public and openly political dimensions. Isolde's father also happens to be German, though not Jewish, and the girl has her own ideas about Jews. Thus when the narrator is praying, Isolde suggests that as a Jew, she cannot believe in God, and the narrator is shocked into an unexpected awareness of new public aspects of her own identity. "How could other people know things about me that I did not know myself? I had never heard the word Jew before, and I did not know what it meant." (p.73). Isolde opens her to the meanings of Jewishness during the war, to her family's tragedy, and to her eventual terrible guilt at having been spared the suffering of other Jews: "The identity that Isolde had planted on me so bewilderingly one night in the dormitory, that strange word "Jewish", was to acquire less mystery and a terrible reality" (p.129) But her awareness is slow in coming, and the discovery of her race does not profoundly disrupt her intimate life in the Cirencester school. Later, her mother, not wanting to explain to her the horrors of destiny of Jews at the hands of the Nazis, sends her to see a filmed report of the war, and the writer is overcome by a powerful terror.

The first serious disruption in the girl's life occurs in 1940, after her first year at boarding school, when she goes home to London to spend Christmas, and her mother unexpectedly gives her the good news that she is to remain home and not be sent back to boarding school. Briefly and movingly, the narrator explains the sorrow she must disguise from her mother so as not to hurt her feelings, and how in having to manipulate her own feelings for the first time she becomes a grown up. In the previous pages she had advanced the family tensions of the next few years, and the general uninspired atmosphere of life in London during war. The reader now knows that happiness is at its end for the narrator, but the happiness and the discoveries of her Cirencester life are hers forever, and will become the source of much wisdom, richness and self-realization, and the town of Cirencester, a holy place to her imagination.

Eva Figes' use of childhood experience in *Little Eden* is structured "beyond" the patterns of childhood as usually handled by women writers of autobiography, and it turns the book into a very unusual autobiographical text. What seems to me most interesting about the story is the strong articulation between past experience and present writing, because Figes does not recur to childhood to sublimate and disguise her identity, an identity that

will be dramatically dissolved later in youth and adulthood. In *Little Eden*, childhood is used at its best and becomes consistent source for a serious search for identity, undisturbed by other traditions or by the manipulations of external power.

The importance of this text should be further discussed not only in relation to what it includes but also in relation to what it omits. For one thing, the writer lacks any sense of guilt in her presentation of a self-enriched being, stimulated by the school rather by the home. Her relationship to her mother is also unpathologically demystified, and the mother's identity and situation are understood with clarity, without a trace of guilt for the writer's aloofness from her. Figes writes the story of her childhood as a self-centered, mature person who chooses to use only some of the more enriching "feminocentric phenomena"¹¹ available to the writing of women's autobiographical tradition. She is further capable of discarding the more wearisome aspects of this tradition, mainly of the classical "rhetoric of uncertainty"¹², a rhetoric that goes back to the earliest texts in woman's self-centered writing, to the very influential autobiography written by Santa Teresa de Jesús, a text that introduces a rhetoric which will be continued in most women's autobiographical writing. Though Figes might not be the first or the only writer to introduce revolutionary changes in women's writing about the self, her text significantly contributes to a new self-understanding and self-esteem in women's autobiographical writing.

11.-Stanton, Domna C., *The Female Autograph*, New York Literary Forum, 1985.

Friedman, Susan Stanford, "Women's Autobiographical Selves" in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiography*, ed. Shari Benstock, pp. 34-63. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1988

12.-Stanton, Domna, *op. cit.* pp. 14.