



Childhood and Literature

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In this paper we analyze the diverse relationship between childhood, as a fundamental stage of human development, and literature, which presumably requires knowledge of language in a way that exceeds the original infants' capacities. Yet, there is a sort of childhood inside the field of literary expression, Again, the moment when an author or artist begins, mostly in the adolescence, the artistic expression by means of words. Childhood exists as a theme in a variety of literary works. So, at the end we have a metaphoric unity of the origin of human life and the first steps in literature, both as topical in the writing process.

1. Introduction

Childhood is what is lost: you always stop being a child. And, yet it is a final paradox, we are never separated from our childhood. Everything is destined to perish; but childhood is the only thing that would not be defeated by death: in the moment of birth, we are already the children we will be. And if Paradise was a place of pleasure and sin, the outer earth—the valley of increased tears—it is also the place of procreation. It is strange that, in *The Book of Genesis*, children are never mentioned as something peculiar to the material world: childhood never existed in Paradise: humans were created in fullness: Father Adam with an iron torso of mature essence; Mother Eva was also created with perfect proportions of a marriageable young woman. *God did not create children*. Children are a fully human invention. They were not contemplated in God's plan. And as mere earthly products and distant from the original divine plan, children are the residue of transgressions to the structure of the universal order. Children of the earth, embers of ancestral errors daily repeated, we humans are condemned to be children before being ourselves.

On the other hand, children are a huge part of population. Globally current population under fifteen is around 25 percent. The world is full of children. They enjoy and suffer, and their pupils dilate before the advent of the astonishing enormities that pass us by every day. Children everywhere. And therefore, children in literature. Childhood and literature are always inseparable. Inseparable because childhood is the nourishing sustenance of the art of



writing; because childhood is the theme of literature and because when you begin to write the world is shaken with pain; and one leaves the world of childhood without yet being prepared for life.

2. The Legacy of Society

The most evident and least visible presence of childhood in literature is the one that deeply permeates the action of words, in such a way that the exercise of writing itself is, regularly, a legacy that we make for ourselves from our childhood: I don't know of writers who did not know how to write and read at the age of ten (although there are probably some out there). Literary writers develop the mechanism of their expression—the appropriation of language—in their first years of life. Their conditions may be variable; their directions, diverse; their destinies, discrepant; but their initial stage will always be the reception of the world through language: a consolidated language, despite the lack of awareness that the little future Nobel Prize winner displays. Whether it is an orphan like Allan Poe, a lonely son like Carlos Fuentes or one of the taxi driver's sixteen children like García Márquez, writers have a different wind, delivered by the early presence of language.

As the myth points out, Borges read Latin at the age of five. And that perhaps marked the issues of his short stories like “The Library of Babel”, “Tlön”, “The Aleph” and other things in his mature work. In a famous poem, Alfonso Reyes, as a child, was chased by the sun. This marked something similar to all children (it is trivially known that this first star points its radiation in a democratic way) but at the same time it distinguished Reyes in that it was he and not another kid who was the fugitive of the light.

But although the space of childhood is the one in which writers assume their material for a mechanical work and face the harsh reality of socially accepted and inveterate language, they also incorporate the foundation of their upcoming works. By “foundation” I do not mean only an early experience of the language but, above all, a mental repercussion manifested in the issues with which the work will deal: being a child and ceasing to be one without wanting to, or at least without having been asked for it.

According to Freud, literary images—and artistic images in general—have a content of infantile repression partially released by the act of literary sublimation. Psychoanalysis addresses, of course, the childhood memories of Leonardo de Vinci and the short story “The Pit and the Pendulum” by Allan Poe, noting the fixation of the feminine and masculine elements evidenced in the symbolism referred to by that title. In practical life, a woman may have a regression to the need for paternal affection and she, for example, could make a scene like a spoiled girl to feel like she is in front of her father again; meanwhile, a woman with



another human name may be making the same trip to the primary world, but in a written scene.

Many things that happen in the lives of *children-future-writers* are, subsequently, the themes or episodes of narrative or poetic works. The survival of memory in the dynamics of being, the insertion of the childhood stage in personal (and collective and global) history, is the axis along which the literary event rotates over time. I do not affirm with this that literature is composed exclusively of remembered childhoods, but childhood is the first profound criterion for choosing non-childhood memories to be part of a literary text.

Once established that childhood is the origin of literature both through the acquisition of its *expresser* (language) and its foundation of matter (the first significant experiences), we must approach childhood as a matter, as a moment and as a framework of literature.

3. Children as Readers and as Characters

Childhood as a matter of literature has two kinds of texts: those directed to children and those directed at adults through the actions of child-characters. The power and presence of children's classics is undoubted; and, to cite some famous cases, Hoffmann, Kipling, Andersen and Saint-Exupéry, among others, have directed their attention to confirming this power. And fantasy, a characteristic improperly identified with the childhood stage, is shown in their stories as something worthy of children. Of course, fantasy is not exclusive to children. However, it is not even more developed in children: adults have more fantasies than children; and we can almost affirm as true and indubitable the fact that, as more time passes, fantasies increase in number and complexity. A good example is the one who has bought a lottery ticket. The adult thinks as illusion, hope, or longing, that which is only a fantasy, a phantasm, an appearance of oneself projected towards the dark expectation of the future.

Another valuable argument is the verification that adults enjoy things suitable for children such as puppets, cartoons, and games more deeply. However, adults—fantasy beings, par excellence—do not live their fantasy freely. Unlike those “normal” adults, the writer and the artist are bold: they dare to express in public an unspeakable fantasy that may exist in the kingdoms of Eros, Thanatos or Ludus. Mexican writer Sergio Magaña always wanted to convince us of a conviction of his: you have to be a very shameless person to be an artist. Imagination must remove the mask of silence to show itself as literature. The display of fantasy with such a large opening is the sign that the child continues to survive in literature. Unlike the *standard* adult, the literary persons display themselves veiledly in their fantasy dominion: Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro stated that the poem is a thing that is not, that will not be, but that we would like it to be. When we write what we would like it to be, we go



beyond our own normality and climb onto the cliffs of the fantastic game. On the other hand, however, the writer also differs from the child: his fantasy is a manipulated, non-fresh fantasy; a fantasy sifted with technique, expressive treachery, and the assumption of a constructive commitment. It is flexible, but it is not untamed; free, but not unbridled; broad, but not infinite.

The writer is a fantastic child covered by technical maturation.

4. The Fantasy in Words

But let's return to our dichotomy: literature for children and literature with children. *The Little Prince* is an apparent paradigm of a text written for children. My experience, which I hope will not be refuted by the experience of everyone else, has shown me that for children this work is practically the same as any other: the child audience is not impressed by the technical skill, the imaginative coherence, the refined taste, the excellent language, and the philosophical depth of *The Little Prince*. As long as it is a fantasy event (that is, a non-materially real occurrence), for children it is the same this book than a comic about talking ducks or mice (if not they even are preferring them than Exupéry). In that sense there is no difference between a children's classic and a sudden and ephemeral text that lacks all the qualities of the former. The division is made by us, adults who, in addition to appreciating the literary plot of the text, appreciate the technique, taste, depth and other values that allow us, unlike children, to demarcate literature into excellent or trivial.

Works for children are guided by an ideal of interlocution that is not always well understood: speaking in the language of children is as difficult as speaking in the language of adults: there will always be an audience that does not "engage" with the text and will remain foreign to the language of the writer. And to stay "outside the text" it doesn't matter if you are a child or an adult. There are children who, unlike some adults, understand, write, and use words like *microcomputer*, *Nebuchadnezzar* or *Triceratops*. Others, both children and adults, will pass by the greatness of the language as the residents of Venice pass by the stained palaces of their daily lives. There are no rules; and the reader cannot be the measure—at least not the basic one—for writing (although perhaps it is for judging what is written).

We can remember two examples aimed at a children's audience. One is the group of verses written by Cuban poet José Martí under the title of *Ismaelillo*. It is formed by compositions that in their rhythm and color, in their dynamics and expression, seek to communicate with a child. Evidently Martí's language, so rhythmic and refined, is not the same as that of his potential child reader. Is the vehicle of versification therefore inadequate? No way. The other example is the work written by Spanish writer Antoniorrobes as *Stories of Rompetacones*



and his other stories about this character. Imaginative but simple situations happen, close to the child's possible real experience. Is this work therefore closer to its audience? Will it be better understood than a Martí rhyme? The writer, without a doubt, is committed to being understood by children. But the same bet is made by those who write for those who are not children.

5. Protagonists and Memories from Early Life

Children are also characters in literary works not suitable, it is said, for children, such as *The Shining*, by Stephen King. Or they are not directly characters but motivations for the characters, as in "The Dead Man", by Horacio Quiroga. In short, the variety would be endless. But let's look at a few examples—exemplary—of the presence of children as inherent protagonists of the literary text. Mexican writer Juan Rulfo put a child, Macario, squashing frogs as they emerge from a hole; and, while he waits, in Macario's cranial realm remembered things happen, glimpses of the future and birds in the flight of transience: this child is an almost random mental course, driven by the memory of the angel's trumpet flowers and the breasts of the nurse. A completely opposite case is that of British novelist William Golding, in *Lord of the Flies*, because there what is being squashed are the children, with spears and stones; and the mental flow almost does not exist as long as the protagonists coexist with the immediacy of human nature in the primal state of its incomprehension. A final example that we will mention in this area is *The Tin Drum*, novel in which German writer Günter Grass shows us a protagonist who is a child who refused to grow up, which is why he is already almost an adult inside and a child in everything else: the symbolized case of the hypersensitive who prefers to remain a child than to commit the atrocity that we adults commit daily with our lives.

Childhood, as a period absent of serious social responsibilities, is the world of imaginary propitiations. Children, we said, imagine without technique; they experience their imaginations without feeling the urge to express them—since they are *their* normality. When you begin to constrain the image to the form, childhood is lost. In fact, the "educators," who propose that children shape (formalize) their images, are removing them from that lack of formality that is childhood: we *form* ourselves, and stop being children. It is to be expected that this process will also happen in the realm of words. Thus, when children appreciate the aesthetic motivation to give a shape to their images, they are no longer imagining but *producing*: it is no longer the informal flow of his words but a story, a poem or something of that nature. Childhood is lost and literary work is gained. That is not bad in itself since childhood, in any case, would be lost; that is why it is more profitable to lose childhood and gain a text than to lose childhood without gaining anything at all.



If this is true, when you begin a literary career, you are on the threshold of losing your childhood. According to temporal canons, around the age of fourteen childhood is definitively left behind and puberty is structured, the difficult path of adolescence, which is the second expatriation. (Mircea Eliade has carefully studied the individual and social display of puberty rites, that is, those things that the child must show to be accepted as an adolescent, capable of reproducing and integrating into the misery, mystery, and magic of adult society.) In what we are now concerned with, we would have a literary moment that marks the acceptance of the person no longer as an imaginer through language but as an author of literary formalized fantasies. There children stop being what they were and becomes literary authors. This happens, according to the rituals of literary initiation, around the age of fourteen. The author stops being a child, loses the innocence of the childhood of language, and enters the childhood of the literary world: and now is a child (a neophyte) in the world of letters.

In his poem “Autobiography”, Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet states: “And, since I was fourteen, my job has been that of a poet,” which is a statement that many (if not most) other great writers could subscribe to. Let us remember some verses of unusual maturity:

From the bottom of you, and kneeling,
a sad child, like me, looks at us.

For that life that will burn in his veins,
our lives would have to be tied up.

By those hands, daughters of your hands,
my hands would have to kill.

For those eyes open on earth
I will see tears in yours one day.

Pablo Neruda wrote these verses from the poem “Farewell” when he was fifteen years old. Another is the living myth of the poet-child that represents throughout Western culture the enormous Arthur Rimbaud, who stopped writing at the age of nineteen and his angelic childhood as a visionary poet has been enough to give us all a lesson of freedom integrated into strong forms that, in turn, are intensely free both in imaginative structure and in verbal flow.



Abandonment of the physical childhood places us in the aesthetic childhood, a golden age to define a direction—or a loss—in the literary republic. But the experience of physical childhood leaves experiences that will not be possible in any other stage of the body. In this sense, authors must accept the return to childhood as a favorite way to enter the primal experience to which all creation aspires. In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke encourages Kappus to investigate the innermost of his own childhood, making him see that loneliness, abandonment, the purity of being, the absence of commitment, contemplation and, above all, the real experience of religious presence, are inside of that lost stage. Rilke considers that every experience lived outside of childhood is permeated by a greater or lesser percentage of hypocrisy, of lack of authenticity. Being like children, refreshing our childhood self in our emotionality, is what will lead to the consolidated poetry, according to that intimate poet. Another author, quite dissimilar in relation to Rilke, both in terms of the genre of his work and in terms of intention and expression, is Fedor Dostoevsky. For the Russian novelist, childhood memories are what make future life bearable. And those who are fortunate enough to have memorable moments in their childhood are those who survive the crisis of the adult world, because they have a world of their own, a private grouping of issues and sensations that illuminate the opacity of maturity.

The presence of childhood memory is a palliative that is a widespread topic in literature. Vicente Huidobro, in his *Altazor*, points out the indubitable presence of childhood and its differentiation from adult experience:

In my childhood a childhood burning like an alcohol
I sat on the roads of the night
To listen to the eloquence of the stars
And the oratory of the tree
Now indifference snows in the afternoon of my soul

This mortal *indifference* is the fee owed by the bouts of maturity that make us feel falsely important, when, in reality, we only glimpse the importance of death, the true empress. Huidobro continues the sequence of those verses:

Let the stars break into spikes
Smash the moon into a thousand mirrors
Return the tree to the nest of its almond

It is almost clear that the return, from the frozen tree of immensity towards the mute persistence of the seed, is the incision of the pain of being an adult, which is asked to recover



that elemental unity that the seed represents with respect to the tree, flowered, yes, but closer to death.

6. Childhood in Life and in Literature

Despite the strange fears and unbearable violence that can be suffered—and are suffered—in childhood, remembering is an exalting act; and it is proven in the case of all those writers who have declared autobiographies, including the multiple lives of contemporary authors. I will quickly cite three Mexican examples: Agustín Yáñez, Enrique González Martínez and Ricardo Garibay. The first of them with his *Flower of ancient games* in which the episodes of the schoolboy who discover the feminine otherness in the girls, the mischief of the escapes from school hidden from the mother, the belligerence for the leadership of the group of friends. González Martínez, in *The Man with the Owl*, remembers the peaceful life of an already non-existent province; and his asceticism, the angelication of his aspirations, the degradation by illnesses. Garibay, on the other hand, calls his initial memoirs *Ferocious childhood and other years*. For Garibay, childhood is the realm of slavery, dependence, fear, and survival, all things that he did not have to face in later stages of his age, as we deduce. But even in him, childhood is the privileged moment of that which only our inability can deprive us of as a possibility of memory.

Currently, we seek to introduce children to word workshops, for they to “mature”, without realizing that, in effect, each step within maturation is a step out of childhood. When we group in a literary workshop those around in their twenties, we are forging them as infants—infantry—of the literary regiment. From there a brave general can emerge, or at least a distinguished officer in his combat position. Children and young people struggle against language, with unequal forces, with dissimilar territories conquered. Reading, writing, poetizing with reading and writing: all of this opens to us the doors of the aesthetic, and, at the same time, closes the doors of direct, past life. The path of the artist is to lose innocence and find virtue. Innocence knows no evil; virtue conquers it. It is terrible to leave the childhood of life, but it is excellent to abandon the childhood of literature.