Making the Self Visible in 19th Century Student Writing: or, "The Ram Might Burn His Eyes Out Before [I Make] Him Another Bonnet"

["As you will hear, this is a paper about the implications of experience-based writing in mid-19th century schools--but I begin with an extended example and then move to a discussion of that example and its wider significance."]

In 1841, Sarah Griffin, a teacher in Georgia, published *Familiar Tales for Children*, a collection of 28 fictional tales intended both to instruct and delight her readers. Like much 19th century popular writing for children, most of the tales use everyday life in ideal family settings to demonstrate desirable behaviors to young readers; in the stories, for example, children obey their parents rather than pursue a forbidden pleasure; they show kindness to their playmates, especially those who are poor, and they recognize the folly--and the consequences--of skipping school. In all these tales, the message is very clear that it is the child's duty to be obedient and respectful and accepting of authority.

Two tales focus exclusively on school behaviors; in one, the heroine allows her friend to win the school prize; again the message is put aside your own desire--sacrifice yourself--for the good of another. In a second school tale, however, called "The School Composition," a somewhat different dynamic is at work. Griffin's fictional personae, a girl Ellen and her mother, Mrs. H., discuss a theme Ellen wrote for school entitled "Industry." Here is part of that theme:

> Industry is a very great virtue: it is one of the greatest virtues, for it leads to all others. How important is it to cultivate it then, to its greatest possible extent. What would the world come to, if there were no industrious people in it? All would soon fall into ruin, and desolation would soon cover the whole earth. . .

> . It is essential that we should commence the practice of industry early in life, for when our habits are formed, it will be in vain to conquer the indolence which has 'grown with our growth, and strengthened with our strength.' (Griffin 128)

The turn of events here is that Ellen's teacher heaps rich praise on the theme; Ellen, however, declares, in her words, that the theme is "stupid"--that the themes of almost all of her fellow students "were almost exactly the same" and they "did not mean much." Ellen's mother agrees and suggests that since the students have been invited to choose their own topics for their next essays, Ellen should write a different kind of essay, and in it "describe some pleasant evening's amusement, or a ramble."

And thus Ellen sets out to describe a Saturday afternoon outing that she enjoyed with her family and friends. A servant drives her and her brother to see their cousins in the country; there the children wander into the pasture where the sheep are grazing in the sun. Worried that the sun must hurt the sheep's eyes, they decide to make bonnets for the sheep out of collard greens. Here is a piece of that text:

> then we went into the pasture where the sheep were: we sat down under a tree: pretty soon Frank said, 'Only see, cousin, how the sheep almost shut their eyes; don't you suppose that the sun hurts them?' 'I don't know, I am sure;' said I, 'I never noticed it before.' So he got up and ran off: pretty soon he came back with some large collard leaves and some string: 'What are you going to do with those collard leaves?' said I, 'O, I am going to make bonnets for the poor sheep;' said he, 'for I know the sun hurts them.' So he and William caught several, and tied the leaves on for bonnets: the creatures did not know what to make of it; they tried to eat them, but their mouths would not turn over; so they ran about sometime with

> them on, till at last they ate them from each other's heads. William tried to catch the old ram, to put a bonnet on him; but he soon made him quit that, for he butted at him and laid him flat. Willie laughed, and said 'the ram might burn his eyes out before he made him another bonnet.'' (Griffin 132-33)

At the end of Sarah Griffin's tale, Ellen takes her experience-based composition to school and notes that "there was never anything like it in the school before." Weary of "Duty," "Industry," "Truth" as topics, she is determined "to set a new fashion [in writing] for the girls" (133-34).

Like the other tales in Griffin's collection, this one shows a young person seeking approval from a parent; unlike the others, however, it shows a child resisting the authority of the teacher--and the site for this resistance is the struggle about the merits of writing about "Industry" versus the merits of writing about making collard green bonnets for sheep, or, the struggle about the merits of writing about abstract topics vs the merits of writing about lived experience.

So--a number of implications. Unlike the universities, which until after the Civil War were educating primarily upper-class students for careers in the law and ministry and responding to the rhetorics of Campbell and Blair with their emphasis on public exchange, the static, the abstract, and the distant, mid-19th century schools were preparing students for the world of work, and especially for the trades and professions. And in their pedagogy, the schools were responding both to the work of Swiss education reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi with its emphasis on direct experience as a learning tool and to a new understanding of the cognitive development of the child. Writing pedagogy in the schools, therefore, as early as the mid-19th century, began to show signs of resistance to

usual caveats prevail

abstract and static topics and signs of the inclusion of the personal and experience-based topic. This resistance is evident not only in the textbooks and in educational writings, but also in the popular literature. Here in the case of the Griffin text, a layered resistance emerges: the fictionalized persona Ellen resists abstract topics, resists the teacher's authority in having assigned those topics, disagrees with the teacher's praise for the paper, and hopes to start a new fashion in writing. Because Griffin wrote her tales for both the delight and instruction of children, there is no reason to think this particular tale is not also meant to instruct--that is, to encourage children to speak up both about their writing--and in it.

When school-based writing included experience--even the experience of making collard green bonnets for sheep--a number of freedoms opened to the writer. Students were invited to describe the simple objects, places, and scenes of their lives; to write about farming and fishing and manufacturing and shopkeeping; to recount their own experiences of friends, family, school, holidays, and reading and writing. And they were invited to give their point of view in this writing, that is, they were asked to give their thoughts on a subject. I don't claim that early 19th century textbook writers or Sarah Griffin "taught" point of view by asking students to write experience-based essays. I do think, however, that asking students to write from their own observation and their own experience opened a space for them to take a position, to begin to write, as Linda Brodkey, says, "on the bias"; when William is butted by the ram, he is very clear that he's not about to befriend any more sheep. In other words, writing that is inflected by lived experience can allow students to take a small step toward critical thinking by helping them to understand that

one way to internalize knowledge or to understand a concept is to filter it through the writer's experience.

When 19th century students followed the college-model, writing memorized themes or themes about abstract topics, they were, of course, reflecting the received wisdom of their culture, whether or not they were aware of it. For example, in the mid-19th century, a common belief was that novel reading, especially for adolescents, was dangerous. In a piece called "Hints to Young Ladies," a writer in an 1856 edition of the *American Journal of Education* said "you have no excuse for reading the profligate and romantic novels of the last century, or the no less profligate and far more insidious romances of the present day" (229). And it is not uncommon to read 19th century student essays--especially essays by older students--that elaborate the dangers of novels. In her 1846 prize-winning essay called "On Novel Reading," Mary King, a student at the Academy of the Visitation, wrote that by reading novels, the mind is "poisoned" and "deceived," and the heart becomes "restless" and "dissatisfied." In King's essay, an essay that I believe is an important cultural document, she follows a common writing pattern in formal texts written by 19th century students: she relies on universals to support her position, and her knowledge, at least as she displays it for the reader, is grounded in external authority rather than personal experience. While King of course may have had experience with novels and with novel reading, there is no visible trace of that in the essay. Instead, the essay demonstrates that she had, and very successfully, learned the accepted position on novel-reading for 19th century young ladies: "Amongst the numerous objects presented by the world to check the improvement of the mind, and prevent the development of those good qualities, natural to the human heart; there is none which produces this effect with more certainty

Here are a few words from K's essay —

than the habit of reading novels." Nothing in King's essay suggests that she understands that the values she represents are not universal or transcendent, but are, instead, circumscribed and limited by a set of contingencies.

I am not prepared to argue that when experience-based writing was introduced in 19th century schools, students were interrogating the social construction of their experiences in the way that some contemporary writers propose; that is, I don't believe the students were using their experience as the basis for cultural analysis. I do, argue, though, that when experience-based writing entered the writing curriculum in the 19th century, its role was, at least in some ways to challenge the status quo of writing assignments: no longer was the published writing of accomplished authors the only acceptable model for student writers; no longer were students required to sound like adults in their writing. When experience-based writing entered the curriculum, children learned that what they did outside of school was important in school, and they further learned that their experience could be the basis for knowledge-production. Finally, and most significantly, I believe that when students represented their experiences in school-based writing, they were taking the first and necessary step toward the critical use of experience that writers like John Schilb and others advocate. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren write, for example, that "Only when we can name our experiences--give voice to our own world and affirm ourselves as active social agents with a will and purpose--can we begin to transform the meaning of those experiences by critically examining the assumptions upon which those experiences are built" (16). The value, thus, of students in the schools writing about their experiences is not simply that they were writing in ways that were in line with their intellectual development; it is that as a discipline, we were taking our first steps toward an

understanding that giving voice to experience can help us to interrogate the culture and the assumptions from which that experience springs.

My emphasis on this innovation is not to discredit or deny the value of writing that is not overtly grounded in personal experience; it is rather to say that teaching students (how) to interrogate experience and to use it as a form of evidence and/or as a place from which to start gathering and/or testing other evidence, practices we so take for granted, were a long time coming to writing instruction, and that when they were introduced, they greatly expanded the concept of what writing was, and what it could do. In the 19th century, experience-based writing made possible a move away from the emphasis on taste that had characterized so much of writing instruction in the 18th and early 19th centuries and the corresponding emphasis on class, and it made space for students whose lives were situated in the world of manual labor and the world of work. Today, this piece of our history--the move toward the democratization of writing instruction--also challenges our profession's long-standing and deeply embedded notion that pedagogical innovation always trickles down rather than percolates up.

What it is to shape a narrative of progress –
– Dorothy Canfield Fisher – "Sex Ed"

" Exp. never speaks for itself; it must be interpreted"
H. Gir.

Bruner –
world making or life-making

Mind is never
= there no innocent eye =
is

Any story is better understood by thinking about other ways of telling it –
= writer's autobiography — =

Recognizable narrative segments
– finding
–
–

= how something happening to someone else might have meant something different — =

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integration of art + writing
drama + writing