

Childhood and youth of an intellectual: Harriet Martineau and 19th century British society

Infância e juventude de uma intelectual: Harriet Martineau e a sociedade britânica do século XIX¹

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Abstract

This article discusses childhood and youth as elements of social analysis based on autobiographical and biographical accounts of Harriet Martineau. It problematizes these accounts as characteristic of modernity and the advance of individualism, while at the same time valuing such sources as a reflective element and as a creator of a narrative about the history of the subject being discussed, through the method of bibliographic and descriptive research. It concludes on the importance of such accounts for understanding the production of each intellectual, as well as the contingent references related to the period and the circumstances in which they lived.

Keywords: Harriet Martineau; Biography; Autobiography; History of Sociology.

Resumo

Este artigo discute a infância e a juventude como elementos de análise social a partir de relatos autobiográficos e biográficos sobre Harriet Martineau. Problematiza estes relatos como característicos da modernidade e do avanço do individualismo, ao mesmo tempo em que valoriza tais fontes como um elemento reflexivo e criador de uma narrativa sobre a história do sujeito a respeito do qual se fala, por meio do método da pesquisa bibliográfica e descritiva. Conclui sobre a importância de tais relatos para a compreensão da produção de cada intelectual, das referências contingenciais relativas ao período e às circunstâncias nos quais viveram.

Palavras-chave: Harriet Martineau; Biografia; Autobiografia; História da Sociologia.

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Introduction

This work addresses the trajectory of the author Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) in her early years of life and highlights relevant elements of her biography, taking into account accounts from the author herself and from third parties. The main objective of this article is to present the Martineau case as illustrative of the intellectual journey of a woman who wrote about and reflected on her childhood and youth. As direct outcomes, the author's accounts provide support for an institutional and contingent analysis of the historical period in which she lived, considering the social treatment received by daughters and children in general. As if that were not enough, she also drew attention to how society and individuals positioned themselves in relation to children with some type of disability or illness. For this reason, the aim of this article is to address these issues and highlight three points in particular: 1) biographical information helps to understand intellectual paths and their relationship with the work produced in these processes; 2) the data available in these works contribute to understanding the socio-historical context, beyond the individual and the trajectory being discussed; 3) the topics chosen by each intellectual reflect their perspective on what society is.

Regarding the methodology used, I conducted a bibliographic and descriptive research of Harriet Martineau's autobiography and of two selected biographies: Fenwick Miller's (in the 19th century) and Elisabeth Arbuckle's (in the 20th century). The research is based on an analysis of historical accounts and autobiographical reflections as units of analysis contained in the texts taken as a sample. Likewise, I address both the autobiographical and biographical production as a source of research. The sample adopted as a reference for this study was defined after conducting an exploratory survey and mapping that preceded this work. Regarding the methodological procedures adopted to examine the reflections and autobiographical accounts identified, recurring patterns and themes were considered, based on comparative analysis.

Let's agree that it is not possible to form an opinion about a person or their work solely based on what they have communicated about themselves or on the opinions of others. For this reason, it is mandatory that research revisits primary

data, not being limited to bibliographic research based only on commentators' texts. When this does not happen, it is necessary to make it clear that the expression of the writer is not about a particular work or intellectual, but about the “what?” and “how?” some commentators refer to them. It is in this sense that I separated the object into autobiographical reports and reflections on one side, and the bibliographical production on the other. In neither case can we consider the data as unveiled truths or present their results beyond what they are capable of indicating.

Biographies, autobiography, and commentators

Imbued with this perspective, the first question we need to consider is what a (self)biography consists of and what kind of information it can provide us about the theoretical or scientific production of a given person. According to Bourdieu (2006), the (self)biography is merely an illusion, consisting of narratives that are an attempt to organize life as a story, to “make sense” of a set of facts. The author considered the subject who narrates the events as an “ideologist of their own life,” selecting occurrences, attributing meaning, and establishing connections between them. Thus, he pointed to the notion of *habitus* to address the situation without straying from the field of Sociology, as well as to investigate the “[...] social mechanisms that favor or authorize the ordinary experience of life as a unit and a totality” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 185). On the other hand, if biography supposedly inherited from literature the need for a logical concatenation of facts, even this no longer relies on that resource. By recognizing that reality is discontinuous, life should not be told as if it were continuous. For him, the production of the “discourse of self” would also be linked to the relationship between *habitus* and field, with the life story being a “type of socially impeccable artifact” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 189). Consequently, I remained attentive to the critique of how the noises of isolated reading of the (auto)biography can be understood for not considering it as an expression of the types of capital that the author had within a field and “the set of objective relations” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 190) in which she was inserted.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus that the production of the autobiography and its establishment as a genre is a reflection and an expression of modernity, being easily identifiable in historical and cultural terms (Calligaris, 1998). Resources for autobiography began at the end of the 18th century, but autobiographical production (considering autobiography, the intimate diary, the journal, and memoirs) refers to an earlier period. This does not imply disregarding the fact that the autobiographical model is associated with modernity and, with it, the development of a “Western individualistic culture.” Biography, on the other hand, emerged much earlier, with biography, autobiography, and the novel being elements that possess a “historical-cultural simultaneity” (Calligaris, 1998, pp. 46 and 48). For this reason, Burke (1997) questioned the concept of biography applied to works from the medieval and Renaissance periods, indicating an incompatibility between our modern perspective and the many examples of these.

Based on such definitions, we need not only to problematize the self-report, but also the production of knowledge and the organization of facts and events that seek to attribute meaning to a given perspective on what an author and her work were or are. In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish the figure of commentators, who sometimes rely only on a superficial bibliographic review of available works or even just the widely disseminated ones. Regardless of that, they end up making categorical statements and generalizations based on traditional narratives without verifiable support, thus serving the role of reproducing myths (Alcântara, 2024a e 2024b).

That said, regarding Martineau's trajectory and condition throughout her life, we have three publications of this nature available, which will be considered in this article. From the late 19th century, we have her autobiography (published in at least two editions) and the biography written by Miller (1887). The latter will be used only as a counterpoint, insofar as it is based on Martineau's text. Furthermore, he incorporates into it his own judgments about facts he did not witness, but claimed to have investigated, although he did not specify or discuss the methods employed. This is a great irony, since he intended to review the autobiography of a methodologist, an advocate of the thesis that every researcher

should make the means, motives, and context transparent, so that the reader could understand the results presented and the perspective from which a given reality is observed (Hill, 2022). This implies that, for the biographed author, everything was contingent and relative, with such assumptions applied to both research and writing (Martineau, 2021). Additionally, I adopted as a reference the contemporary work of Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle (1928-2019), who was a scholar of Martineau's work, as well as one of the founders and president of the *Martineau Society* in England. The manuscripts were reviewed by Valerie Sanders and Gaby Weiner and published by the *Martineau Society*, chapter by chapter, in e-book format. Consequently, this is a document whose review work was completed in 2025, but it does not contain a reference to the date.

I take the opportunity to highlight how common it is to lack criticism of Miller's (1887) stance, taking his accounts as fact rather than as an interpretation of an autobiographical interpretation. Another mistake concerns the confusion between the version published by this author and Martineau's autobiography. This can be explained by the fact that one of the reprinted editions at the time changed the title from “Harriet Martineau” to “*Harriet Martineau’s autobiography*” (Alcântara, 2021). It may seem unnecessary to point this out, but it happens that in some editions and works there is a reference to Miller's book as an “autobiography,” since she literally copied part of Martineau's account but presented it in the third person of singular. As far as I could ascertain, the biography written by Miller was published in 1884 in London by W. H. Allen & Co., and in 1887 in Boston by Roberts Brothers (Alcântara, 2024a).

Having made these considerations, I will refer to the autobiography only when it concerns the original work published in 1877 and its reprints. It began to be written in 1831, was resumed in 1841, and then again in 1855 (Martineau, 1877a, p. 01). Therefore, it was discontinued at least twice before being resumed and completed in a version that remained preserved until the author's death.

Of course, mistakes are common and are part of the human experience. As Martineau would say, they can be retracted when presented in a way that is scientifically contestable (Martineau, 2021). However, in the case of reading

commentators in other languages, one must exercise extra caution to avoid plagiarism. Here we face a significant methodological difficulty, as Miller's text (1887) makes use of Martineau's words, but judges them. She did not limit herself to dates and inconsistencies, but advocated regarding what would be the “correct” interpretation of a fact, neglecting and judging the perceptions of the biographical theorist herself. She even referenced people with whom Martineau barely maintained contact (from maturity to the end of her life), such as her brother James. Ironically, Miller harshly criticized the editor of the autobiography, Mary Chapman, for errors regarding dates and other issues, claiming that Martineau had not described herself well, with the editor taking on the role of defending the author from herself. Moreover, she criticized the described memoirs. Miller's claims are hardly defensible in this regard. Memories are socially constructed and re-signified, not referring only to what was actually seen or felt, but interpreted and even imagined in light of accounts that are not clearly identified. In any case, an autobiography is about how a person relates their perception of reality and much less about a discussion on the truth of the facts (Calligaris, 1998).

Childhood, socialization, and self-knowledge

In her self-image, Martineau is quite critical of her own behavior, which illustrates a type of personality and a narrative regarding her life story. However, throughout her account, even though she did not accept “discourse” as the main source but rather “things” (Martineau, 2021, pp. 86, 87, 124, 149, 191; Alcântara, 2022), the reference to contingency, institutions, and opportunities is illustrative, on one hand associated with behavioral improvement and, on the other, cultivation. In fact, a more detailed examination could be appropriate, considering the wealth of information present in her autobiography (Martínez, 2025, p. 08), but I will highlight only a few points so that the reader can understand and perhaps take an interest in it.

Methodologically, it is not possible to ignore the fact that the theme of “children” was an object of observation that, for her, necessarily belonged to the institutions required for an adequate understanding of society and whose reference

is extensively documented in the author's texts. In this regard, Martineau spoke about the “types of children” and the “character of childhood” (Martineau, 2021, p. 185-186), making clear how much this was a product of race, class, and the type of society in which they are socialized (Martineau, 2021, p. 130).

What are children's minds made of? The little Indian boy of the West will not speak of choosing a profession, no more than the Portuguese infant will ask for books. A nation of children will tell of All Saints' Day, and another will refer everything to the emperor. Elsewhere you will be treated with endless legends; or you will be instructed on bargains and rents; or the boys will ask you why a king's son must be king, whether people like him or not; and the girls will whisper something to you about their brothers being president someday. As the minds of young people are formed, generally speaking, as an adaptation to the objects presented to them, their preference for military over commercial, or literary over political honor, is an eloquent circumstance: and, then, of their sense of nobility in any direction - whether it be physical, intellectual, or spiritual (Martineau, 2021, p. 130).

Or, furthermore:

Children in all countries are, as Mrs. Grant of Laggan says, first vegetables, then animals, and then they become people; but the way they grow from one stage to another is as different in different societies as are their stages of mind as they grow. They all have limbs, senses, and intellects; but their growth of heart and mind depends infinitely on the spirit of the society in which they are raised. The traveler must study them wherever he finds them. In one country, crowds of them sit in the streets, warming in the sun, and killing worms; while the children of the poorest people in another country are decently dressed, and/or very busy with such household chores as they are capable of, or at school, or playing among the stones, or climbing trees, or crawling over wooden bridges, without fear or danger. From this symptom, the observer can learn the poverty and idleness of the lower classes of Spain, and the comfort and industry of those in the United States. As for the children of the wealthiest classes, there exists the widest difference in the world between those who are the idols of their mothers (as in societies where the love of the heart is lavished on children not bound by the husband), and those who are prematurely plunged into corruption (as in slaveholding countries), and those who are raised as philosophers and saints, and those for whom the home is a sunlit paradise surrounded with love and care, and those who are little men and women of the world from the time they could walk alone. All these types of children exist - secure breaths of the moral

atmosphere of their homes. The traveler must observe them, speak with them, and learn from their burden regarding their parents, and the curve of their affections, what the spirit of the families of the land is (Martineau, 2021, p. 185).

Paying attention to Martineau's own considerations, I will now turn to the analysis of her autobiography. From issues such as family dynamics, relationships with each family member, her self-portrait in childhood (as someone sickly, fearful, needy, and jealous), personal conflicts and disputes, to her first experiences outside the home and the influence of remarkable people in her life as role models. Additionally, her contact with early theorists through books (such as Locke, Hartley, Joseph Priestley, Dugald Stewart, Carpenter) and eventually her personal interactions with great intellectuals and researchers in Europe at the time (Malthus, Darwin, Jane Marcet, Charlotte Bronte, James Mill, among others) make up the autobiography written by the author (Alcântara, 2021). As a result, her text speaks of her experience as always conditioned by social relationships and the territories in which she found herself, providing substantial information about various characters who shared the public stage with her.

The accounts of her family, the daily life in her home, and social relationships are very rich and refer to her ancestral origins as a recognized identity (Alcântara, 2021; Navarro-Fossar, 2021; Martínez, 2025). She descended from Huguenots, from the Martineau and Pierre families, who went to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1688. Her father was the youngest of the siblings and did not follow the family tradition of becoming a doctor, choosing instead to be a manufacturer in Norwich. He married Elizabeth Rankin, whose family were sugar refiners in Newcastle upon Tyne. The Martineau couple had 8 children, with Harriet being the sixth (Martineau, 1877a). Curious and striking facts from her memory are brought up in her autobiographical reflections. About her childhood, the author reported that her wet nurse had deceived her mother and, as a result, she almost died of starvation. She explained that her mother attributed her poor health and constant malaise to this fact (Martineau, 1877a, p. 08) and Harriet supposedly blamed her mother for not having noticed it at the right time (Arbuckle, s/d, cap. 01, p. 03). This relationship with her mother undergoes a

turnaround as Harriet grows older and they begin to share moments of complicity. Once again, her text presents the argument that ignorance is a serious problem that can only be resolved through access to adequate information and necessary measures, while also problematizing the relationship between mothers and children throughout both of their developments. Her accounts highlight both contingencies and changes, asserting the role of institutions as determinants of social behavior and emphasizing women's experiences.

This reflection is striking in that the anxieties and suffering were experienced in a state of solitude and that she did not share this matter with her parents, as well as in the important consideration that her childhood might have been of a different nature had this communication been closer. However, Martineau referred to this as a structural issue, explaining that “the joyful tenderness” (which she considered absent in her upbringing) was regarded as harmful to children in the society of that period. Naturally, although the diagnosis related to a structural issue, the consequences were felt individually: “All of this is very painful; but I really remember few things that were not painful at that time in my life” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 17, my translation).

Another example listed by the author recounts the period of early childhood and how children from a middle-class family were cared for during that historical period. Until the age of 2 or 3, Harriet was raised by a couple, which would have greatly influenced her during childhood. She described them as “Methodists or some kind of melancholic Calvinists” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 09, my translation) and deeply religious. In doing so, she indicated that the social influences experienced by children throughout their upbringing and environment were relevant for understanding their behavior, completely distancing herself from an essentialist view of reality. Thus, the fact that they were raised away from their parents triggered a sense of estrangement upon returning home. This is not just a perception, but a social experiment that has fallen out of use, in which children were cared for by third parties, being taken from their homes and family environment for this purpose. Consequently, the author identified patterns and factors that she believed maintained a causal relationship and explained these

phenomena. In other words, even during the period in which she was writing her autobiography (already at 53 years old), she maintained her method of analysis and applied it to reflecting on the course of her own life. The hallmark of empiricism and rationality as drivers of knowledge developed in relation to the world and self-knowledge (Hill, 2022). More than that, she discussed childhood, its conditions, and its consequences, not only in personality formation but also in social and political behavior, clearly indicating elements of what we today call socialization processes (Berger and Luckmann, 2010). Furthermore, she placed children as subjects and objects of study, indicating their perceptions, feelings, anxieties, needs, development, and the treatments they received in different societies, demonstrating differences according to classes, ethnicities, and their respective “prevailing morals” (Martineau, 2021).

Right at the beginning of the autobiography, we notice that Martineau tried to systematize the facts she remembered and wanted to mention them in a rationalized way, verifying them and questioning their existence or even their meaning. Obviously, as the author herself recalled, it is a written discourse, with a high capacity for writing and persuasion, reminiscent of Calligaris's (1998) discussion on “truth” and “sincerity” in autobiographies. Your memories are related to emotions, sensations, and affections, but almost all of them refer to some knowledge learned about yourself, others, and the world. This continuum seems to indicate a moral improvement and refers to the social and structural conditions that made this possible. Therefore, it seems to me a rich account to consider within the scope of both Sociology of Education and Sociology of Childhood studies, not only for addressing the topic, but also for positioning itself as an object, denaturalizing, and deconstructing its own trajectory.

From thoughtless acts, to the nanny who talks about how her mother likes her for mending her socks while everyone sleeps, the journey to her grandparents' house in Newcastle and the surprise of the sundial in the garden, or even the barber's lies about shooting stars, Harriet continued to describe how the world presented itself to her throughout her childhood and to what extent this became established as knowledge about how life worked in the relationship between

individuals, nature, and society. Introspective and inward-looking behavior can be observed in many of these accounts, as well as the astonishment at realizing she had been misled by stories or myths she had never suspected could be fragile or even untrue (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 22-25). I highlight here three passages that exemplify these issues. First, regarding her initiation into politics and foreign affairs, she recounted her parents' grief over Nelson's death at the Battle of Trafalgar on 10/21/1805, and their anxiety about a potential invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) in Norfolk. The year referenced in the heading is 1808, and the author was 6 years old. Second, she mentioned two cases experienced with “E”, a friend who lost her leg due to an illness. Martineau had already written about it in the book *The Crofton Boys*, stating that she was concerned about “E” feelings regarding such publication. Third, in 1811, Harriet went to the countryside to take care of her health and noted that she was quite unhappy, reporting conflicts with the governess. Regarding the period in the countryside, the author explained that her memories were recounted in *Deerbrook* (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 18, 35-38), and that it was not appropriate to recall them in the autobiography.

Youth, injustice and nature

Conflicts appear as something crucial for her personal development: Feeling out the situation; developing the ability to speak and the courage to confront; perceiving the reactions of the people involved. Through this, she gradually gained space and learned a little more about how the environment works and about the people she thought she knew in detail. In her youth, the conflicted relationship with her sister Rachel and the suspicions of favoritism from their mother toward her were among those situations in which the author felt oppressed. The case apparently ceased when Martineau managed to confront and express how she felt, labeling the act as a “breakdown.” In the end, after the momentary drama and the repression experienced by her mother, she was able to move forward and feel better regarding these circumstances and the family relationship in general. Especially by realizing that verbalization and clarity contributed to the progress of the parties involved and the issue itself, promoting personal development, but also collective

growth, based on constant learning. Martineau contrasted reservation and silence with the ability to verbalize her perception of the world and to gain better self-knowledge, concluding that the latter promotes a kind of “healing.” Furthermore, she explained that this balance between challenging or resisting and remaining at peace was very difficult to achieve, only truly managing to reach it at the age of 40 (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 67 and 68).

In the end, Martineau critically reflected on her immaturity, daydreams, and how her behavior in childhood had been “bad,” justifying that the type of family structure, the relationship of her parents with their children, and between the children themselves, hindered the development of healthier behavior. The author supposed that this contributed to her constant need for approval, affection, and the presence of extreme jealousy, culminating in “acknowledged obstinacy and stubbornness” in youth or being an “unbearable child” (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 15 and 16, my translation). It is, therefore, a caustic account, not romanticized or concerned with a docile image or one that conforms to socially acceptable standards.

On the other hand, the question remains as to what would be considered injustice for Martineau, a term to which she referred with some frequency, but the author literally mentioned in her autobiography the “justice due from the stronger to the weaker” and the “oppression that servants and children universally, as I supposed, had to endure,” or, likewise, in the “doctrine of passive obedience” (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 16-17, my translation). The theme of justice appeared not only in that work but also in others (Martineau, 2021, 2022, 2024, for example), yet, probably, the cited passages refer to her earliest reflections on hierarchy and authoritarianism, the lack of freedom and autonomy, against which Martineau claimed to have always fought, from her earliest childhood, as a matter of justice.

She also reported her experience with what she called “social issues” and, again, a “passion for justice” (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 17-18, my translation). In this case, Martineau highlighted the impositions made on the servants and the insults directed at them, with the children of the house acting as messengers. The author demonstrated awareness regarding what and how the servants took revenge.

Therefore, the dynamics of the household were important and political from her perspective, perceiving the nuances and power relations involved. This is a good example of how she problematized the domestic environment and the institution of the family.

Furthermore, throughout her life, her relationship with nature was always prominent (Martineau, 2022b, pp. 109, 111, 150, for example, and Martineau, 2024). She advocated that human beings are capable of inducing and modifying natural processes, which was also described in *Household Education*, published in 1849. Daily walks through gardens, parks, and near forests were always a constant reference in her writings and a practice she nurtured as a space for mental and physical health, but also for the development and maturation of ideas (Martineau, 1877a). The author used to assert that the habit of walking was a necessity and an English custom (which she did not observe in the habits of North Americans), which helped her think and structure her texts (Martineau, 2024). Moreover, it was her passion for nature that prompted her to move to the lake region, after a long period of seclusion due to illness (Martineau, 1877a). Her passion and experience with nature were so great that she even wrote at least two guides about tourism in lake regions, in 1854 and 1855.

At 13 years old, Martineau recounted that her family was informed about the Battle of Waterloo, with the definitive defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, which led her to investigate with her mother what memories she had of the French Revolution. Being curious, she discovered that her mother had “sympathy” for the royal family and the young “dauphin.” She reported that during times of war, news had to be read and recounted so that information could be shared, making this a reason for interaction with her teacher, but also with the household servants, to whom the author claimed to “explain” what was happening. This illustrated the contact between the owners' house and the servants' quarters, representing those who possessed information considered legitimate and the access to the means of obtaining it. She recounted that she felt the same way 40 years later, during the war of 1854 (Martineau, 1877a, p. 60), when gathering with the people of the house to discuss the news that was arriving. Understanding and following the war was a

political matter, and seeing it in people's daily lives was something that impressed Martineau, highlighting her reactions to the news that materialized her feelings of fear, repulsion, or satisfaction. If the war was impressive, the supposed period of peace was even more so, since internal problems began to appear more vehemently, such as theft, violence, poverty, and news of a possible revolution (Martineau, 1877a, p. 61). Later, this earned him another book and a subsequent introduction to it: *The history of the thirty years' peace, A.D. 1816-1846* (1849) and *Introduction to the History of the Peace, from 1800 to 1815* (1851).

Martineau described her development between 1819 and 1832 (returning to and leaving Norwich) as a process of encountering her older sister (both matured and began to relate better after the latter got married), her older brother (already established as a surgeon in the city), and even her mother (who reportedly began to treat her with more trust and tenderness “as my mind increasingly opened” and whose advancing deafness left her more debilitated) (Martineau, 1877a, p. 76, my translation). At the same time, she later experienced the losses of her older brother, her father, and her fiancé (due to illnesses that led to their deaths); her older sister (because of the disagreement regarding healing through mesmerism); and her younger brother (due to conflicts she preferred not to detail). Added to this is the fact that, with the exception of the latter, the other family members are mentioned by her as great supporters of her work and her “independence of judgment and action” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 77, my translation).

Religion, education and cultivation

Regarding religious upbringing, there is no report of intolerance from her Unitarian parents toward other practices and religious denominations, but there were criticisms (not judgments). These were related to behavior produced by a kind of morality that underpins a given religion and shapes a particular worldview. As a result, Martineau began to observe a variety of attitudes and behaviors that distinguished the “we” from how “they” act or think. She persistently questioned the function and comfort that religion provided her in childhood and the ways she used it to feel good and, in a way, secure. However, she showed no illusions about

it, especially since she referred to these uses as very convenient (Martineau, 1877a). It is also likely that the fear repeatedly reported by the author was related to the religious influence she experienced, as she described herself as a “remarkably religious child.” She also did not fail to mention suicidal thoughts she had even in childhood, associating them with some sort of injustice or revenge (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 13-14, my translation). It is worth remembering that the topic “Suicide,” addressed in her work “How to Observe,” is found within the chapter “Religion.”

At various times, she felt guilty and had difficulty expressing herself regarding events of all kinds, which led her, again, to a kind of avoidance related to religion. There was a tension between a still underdeveloped and immature consciousness, yet one that was already capable of perceiving these subtleties of social relationships. Furthermore, this condition conflicted with the lack of an ability to speak out, which was closely associated with the existence of an “imposition of passive obedience and silence,” generating anguish, suffering, and frustration. These feelings were channeled into activities that did not help to overcome the problem. Among the reports, there is a reference to the “Sunday practices,” which only ceased when the deafness worsened and affected his ability to maintain attention to speech. During the same period, Martineau claimed to have great admiration for clergymen and ministers: “*Su vida temprana y sus escritos reflejan una profunda lealtad a la cosmología unitarista y a la teología Cristiana*” (Hill, 2022, p. 134)². Subsequently, he stated that he had realized that both the moral and intellectual judgment of this category were inferior to those of others (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 25-26).

According to Hill (2022), this intellectual trajectory, which began with the “theological certainty” (based on the attempt to reconcile religion and reason), progressed to “rational fictions,” passing through metaphysics and empiricism, until arriving at atheism and positivist philosophy. For each period of her life, both characters and contexts and subjects continued to present themselves, showing the

² “His early life and writings reflect a deep loyalty to Unitarian cosmology and Christian theology.”

author a perspective that became contingent over time, distancing her from a dogmatic and peremptory bias. This relativist and relational stance marked Martineau's methodological legacy (Alcântara, 2022). The fact is that while time has always been an ally in this process of development and maturation, other conditions and opportunities have also contributed to it.

So, she considered herself “desperately methodical,” while at the same time confessing to several mistakes she had made and devoted herself to throughout her life. One of the uses she made of this methodical ability in her youth was trying to systematize the Old and New Testaments by separating vices and virtues, with the intention of building a system. In other words, she tried to rationalize the reading of the main text used by her religion, both for the classification of morals (seeking to identify and understand them) and for the formation of a system (which, in her youth, the author imagined existed) (Martineau, 1877a).

Argumentaba sus posiciones religiosas con convicción y, sobre todo, con sistema. Su insistencia en la razón, la claridad y la lógica apareció pronto e influyó en la mayor parte de su obra, especialmente en sus análisis sociológicos de las instituciones sociales y la práctica política (Hill, 2022, p. 135).³

That was what the author believed at the time, corresponding to her horizon of understanding and the knowledge she had acquired. When she wrote her autobiography, even though she had a completely different stance regarding the same subjects, she did not refrain from mentioning them openly. This shows how Martineau maintained a sense of ease regarding these changes and phases, recognizing them as circumstantial and processual, not essentialist or ingrained in her own personality or character. Martineau did not appear embarrassed or ashamed to admit in various passages that she had given up on something she had tried to accomplish but did not succeed in. Part of this processual view of life was the consideration that nothing was given or constituted from the beginning.

³ He defended his religious positions with conviction and, above all, with method. His insistence on reason, clarity, and logic emerged quickly and influenced most of his work, especially in his sociological analyses of social institutions and political practice.

Everything was socially conditioned, and the product of it could not be considered otherwise.

Still regarding this rationalist perspective and its relationship with religion, the author harshly criticized the fact that Unitarians considered themselves “Christians” (and in the case of her own family in particular). Consequently, she claimed that dissidence “degenerated” into Unitarianism. To illustrate this, she used her own family’s trajectory, since her Huguenot ancestors, expatriated and fleeing from Normandy, were Calvinists who were followed by what she called the “pseudo-Christianity of early Arianism” and later by Unitarianism (Martineau, 1877a, p. 27, my translation). At that historical moment, the term Christian was often conflated with Catholicism, perhaps explaining the author's dislike of its use: “The Unitarianism of my relatives saved me from that” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 30, my translation). Martineau referred to the fact that she considered sin and mercy as torments for Catholics; however, this did not apply to Unitarians. She therefore perceived religion as an element that expressed the “prevailing morals” and resulted from various factors that contributed both from its creation to the adaptation to different peoples and environments (Martineau, 2021). Despite everything, the author pointed out religion as having been her “best resource,” even though she no longer had any connection with Unitarianism or any religion. It is intriguing that religious practice initially led her to invest in logical reasoning, curiosity, and the habit of questioning, which she claimed she had not developed nor realized the need for until the age of 8. Martineau cited as an example a conversation she had with Thomas, her older brother, when she was eleven years old, in which he stated that her doubts would not be answered anytime soon, but she believed she had the right to know the basis and functioning of phenomena and beliefs (Martineau, 1877a, p. 33). This becomes quite clear when reading her texts, considering her intellectual journey in chronological terms (Hill, 2022; Navarro-Fossar, 2021).

She understood that she gradually developed greater moral and spiritual control. This depended directly on chance and the circumstances her family was experiencing, but also on the opportunities that happened to arise. By reflecting

on herself, her thoughts, her behaviors, and her place in the world, Martineau exposed herself, acknowledged mistakes, fears, selfish thoughts, and all kinds of immaturity. She was harshly judged for this, having described herself as a human figure, susceptible to vices and virtues, which can be stimulated or cultivated. Not by chance, Miller (1887) excerpted her accounts and chose those he considered most worthy for a person in such a position. Miller (1887) placed her in an almost naturally prominent position, distancing the social processes that shaped her as a person and professional, in a thread that gradually unfolded. However, the author's focus has always been centered on the capacity for learning, development, and the cultivation of certain practices that facilitate access to knowledge. Regarding her mental characteristics, Martineau highlighted that excessive fear and discouragement (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 40 to 43), which she experienced in childhood, contrasted greatly with her bold, adventurous, and curious traits from youth onward. On several occasions, she described related situations, such as those described in Martineau (2022; 2024).

Similarly, regarding religion, since the author presented it as a source of pleasure and happiness in her childhood. Miller (1887) attributed this fact not so much to Martineau's own characteristics, but to the profile of Unitarian religion practiced by her family (Martínez, 2025). During the period when Harriet stayed at the boarding school in Bristol (when she was between 16 and 17 years old), she was influenced by Reverend Carpenter, who was known as a great Unitarian preacher and whom she credited with her highly “superstitious” and religious phase in youth. This critique is one of many reported in the autobiography and which carried with it all the fury one might imagine. The author, who was completely captivated by Carpenter's religious guidance, went as far as describing him in adulthood as reduced to this quality of pastoral handling (Martineau, 1877a, p. 73).

Martineau revealed a feeling of frustration with her own life and always saw in each trip or new event an opportunity to start over. For example, with the birth of her younger sister, she saw the possibility of gaining a better understanding of human development. This stance differs from the maternal perspective centered

solely on care and affection. Her accounts demonstrate extreme curiosity and an interest in observation as a tool capable of providing insights into her needs. Furthermore, she seemed to suggest that there was a change in the routine and dynamics of family care, since her younger sister was probably at home, thus being available for observation and monitoring by family members at all times. She reported, for instance, that she was present when the baby was vaccinated or fell ill and that she was impressed by how she learned to speak spontaneously or with little prompting (Martineau, 1877a, p. 40).

The combination of experience and knowledge also occurred in relation to death and the Earth, the sea, and the observation of comets, and so on (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 44-45). All of this indicates an attempt to understand the world from a very young age, seeking to observe it and being aware of the knowledge that careful observation can provide about anything. From a curious childhood (whose only confronted objects were religious questions and philosophical debates that intersected her admiration for dissenting theologians), to adulthood (with the recognition of her immaturity in understanding the errors of criticisms she made at certain times or attitudes towards people and works), the author reflected on how her social existence was conditioned socially, politically, economically, religiously, and geographically. It is about childhood that Martineau herself described being considered a religious “fanatic,” whose peak supposedly occurred in her youth (from ages 15 to 18). Because of this, she was heavily criticized by her own family, who even made jokes about it. During this period, the author devoted herself to studying biblical writings and their commentators (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 63, 73, 74, and 79), reaching adulthood as a skeptic, rationalist, and a person of “free thought” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 120).

Reports indicate that Harriet's mother identified the need for her to attend a boarding school. Interestingly, the author claimed that the Unitarians were completely opposed to this. Martineau went to the boarding school run by Aunt Kentish (with whom she claimed to have an excellent relationship), the “broke uncle” (her mother's brother), and her cousins. During this period, she reported experiencing a leap in her personal development and understanding of the world.

For 15 months, she was able to experience being away from her family, encounter a different type of daily interaction, be encouraged and supported in her emotional needs, and also be surrounded by people who stimulated her to acquire new knowledge and go beyond what she had already achieved: “My mother did very well in sending me to be among people so superior to me, who brought me moral and intellectual improvement, although the experiment failed regarding my health” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 69, my translation). It was during this period that Martineau felt her deafness worsening and, because of that, believed she would achieve a more satisfactory result by returning to study at home (Martineau, 1877a, p. 71).

Her lack of understanding of the purpose of the trip and the worsening of her deafness during the stay did not prevent Harriet from realizing how far behind she was compared to the knowledge displayed by her cousins. Certainly, the opportunity to live in a different family environment and to experience a larger educational institution made her question her certainties and confront perspectives different from her own: “I had learned a lot and was beginning to find a good way to learn more” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 74, my translation).

Household management, autonomy, and limitations

Another memory that Martineau highlighted was when she felt “the awakening of love for money” (Martineau, 1877a, p. 19, my translation), which was nothing more than a love for independence and control over its maintenance. Citing the case of her family, the author showed that each member progressively moved towards managing a higher monetary value, which was associated with taking on greater responsibilities. Some examples cited by Martineau confirmed this perception, showing how girls and boys were encouraged to manage their income and expenses according to the particular needs of each stage of life.

Similarly, manual skills were developed and encouraged within the family environment. In the case of women (white and middle-class), in particular, these activities involved sewing and embroidery, among others. These habits were not considered productive, but they were associated with the ability to be independent

and to make products for self-consumption. However, they were so deeply ingrained that they appeared at various times as inherent to the reproduction of daily life. Even while traveling by boat in the lake region in the northern United States, Martineau mentioned working with needles and pens in the same sentence, as if they were intermittent. This reference also appeared in her autobiography, covering her formative period up to the end of her life (Martineau, 2024; 1877a, pp. 53 e 78). In fact, the needles were only a part of what the author called “household management matters,” which also included food production, clothing care, and house organization. However, her concern went far beyond that, as she thought of the home as a productive unit that needed coherent and skilled management so that everything would function satisfactorily, including service or productive activities that depended on what was provided at home. This is very clear in her text when she shows that her mother was a great manager of these activities, which were/are considered minor but are fundamental for the proper functioning of family members' lives. Elizabeth Ranke (1772-1848) received “a check,” that is, a budget, to cover household expenses in the best possible way (Martineau, 1877a, p. 64) and to meet the family's needs (Arbuckle, s/d, chapter 01, p. 02).

Later, Martineau agreed to write about it with the aim of training workers through domestic service manuals. This theme was not ignored by the author, as it was central to a productive life that would establish a functional environment for the members of a family unit. In this specific case, the author managed to bring together some of her most persistent concerns: The training of women for work; the rational and optimized organization of the home as a productive unit for the benefit of all its members; the fight against poverty through work training and self-sufficiency under adequate living conditions; and the understanding that there were alternatives for free and paid work for women, which needed to be considered feasible and possible.

Nevertheless, among the autobiographical accounts, there is the relationship between autonomy and independence in the face of manifestations of physical disability. She realized her hearing difficulty when she was at “Mr. Perry’s school” and mentioned it in the story of Hugh Procter and in her essay on Scott (Miller, 1887), but also in her autobiography. Martineau problematized illness and

how much it was ignored as an element of differentiation and disparity among people, especially during childhood. The author discussed the difficulty of being aware of the limitations faced because of it, which led her to an important reflection on another issue: How society related to the various manifestations of illness, the sick, and their social role, as well as the expectations and resources devoted to them. Her hearing loss was slow and gradual, which led her to reflect on types of deafness and types of deaf people. Always attentive to stories and forms of advice, she recounted an embarrassing moment that her older brother had supposedly experienced upon seeing a deaf lady being treated disrespectfully and impatiently when she insisted that one of the people present at the event keep her informed about what was being said. Martineau then concluded that she should never ask what was said and should always rely on the goodwill of those present to inform her of what they considered important or necessary (Martineau, 1877a, p. 56). She had understood that little or nothing could be done beyond that at that moment. As a result, the author differentiated the “privation” suffered by those who have some type of disability, for which people feel sympathy, from the fatigue caused by “obstruction,” when one has more than one disability, like herself, who claimed to have three out of five (hearing, smell, and taste) (Martineau, 1877a, p. 57). In this regard, Martineau also discussed in *Letter to the Deaf*, in 1834, which is sometimes interpreted as inadequate or limiting.

The suffering and difficulties reported by the author did not refer solely to the worsening of this limitation, but also to a type of family structure in which feelings were supposed to be suppressed, which caused her even more problems than those she was already enduring. Allegedly, her mother did not encourage the acknowledgment of limitations, which would have hindered people's behavior toward Martineau and allowed for misinterpretation, as they did not realize that she was not listening to them. Until a certain date, the author avoided social gatherings due to difficulties arising from deafness. As a result, pejorative attributes came to be indicated as character traits, rather than recognizing the situation itself: “false pride, pretense, and selfish extortions” (Miller, 1887, my translation). In many passages of her writings, Martineau referred to herself in

childhood and youth as having a terrible temperament, which was possibly due to the various illnesses and difficulties she faced (Martineau, 1877a, p. 64).

Martineau understood that families had difficulties facing illnesses, disabilities, and their manifestations, adopting a stance that would bring some relief to this “weakness and discomfort,” which was denial of the truth, while at the same time overburdening the “sufferer.” One of the examples she cited is that, at first, the person's family was thought to have blamed them for not hearing what was being said, and later, for not telling them that they could not hear. The author demonstrated how a family needs to be aware of and understand the health problem affecting one of its members in order to be able to offer assistance or, at the very least, not make the situation worse.

Aside from the problem itself, the prejudice and harassment that were committed against people with some type of disability always drew her attention. To the point that, upon realizing she was deaf and progressively worsening, she remembered the case I mentioned earlier and a cousin who lived in the countryside from whom people would flee because they had to speak loudly enough for her to understand what it was about. Martineau then asked herself: Will I be one of those people whom others avoid? Will I be feared and hated? Nevertheless, the use of the trumpet began only in adulthood, which the author considered a mistake on her part. In 1820, she could already have used the instrument, which she only began to adopt 10 years later, after a treatment that resulted in a temporary improvement in her hearing (Martineau, 1877a, pp. 58-59; 95). At that moment, Martineau realized how much her friends had to make an effort for her to hear them. I emphasize that this social analysis of how diseases, patients, and the processes of becoming ill are elaborated, treated, and interpreted is today a subject of the sociology of health, to which the author contributed directly in some texts.

Final considerations

This article revisits the autobiography as a life story illustrative of the image Martineau cultivated of herself and the elements she documented and highlighted to be preserved for posterity. All of this, to some extent, shows how the author

critically reflected on herself as a social being, shaped according to life periods, economic and cultural conditions, and, of course, gender conditions. This makes her autobiographical account a rich element, not only in terms of dates and facts, which can be challenged based on documentary sources or compared with other accounts, but also in terms of perceptions and the critical analysis of this subject in the world, positioned as an object of reflection.

Martineau's autobiography vividly portrays the notion of gender as a form of self-knowledge and as a means of modifying the individual and their life, taking into account the contingencies and the plurality of forms assumed in the same society and historically conditioned. It thus depicts institutional development over time, her perceptions regarding it, and the impacts she perceived on her own life in relation to it. Concurrently, it provides readers with a set of examples regarding the daily life of a middle-class Unitarian industrial family, which helps us understand its formation, characteristics, and influences during childhood and youth. Finally, it highlights certain issues as central to her narrative, which she problematizes across other works, such as gender inequality, authoritarianism, education, hierarchies, democracy, injustices, religion, and the societal life of people with some type of disability.

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