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**“Scripture Its Own Interpreter”:
Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Bible* and Female Autobiography**

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I: Accuracy and Anxiety

<1>The scant critical response to the work of Mary Martha Sherwood does little justice to her influence on the development of children’s literature in the nineteenth century, or her contribution to the wider fields of Evangelism, pedagogy and life writing. Born in 1775, the eldest daughter of a successful and moderate clergyman, Sherwood was educated at the Abbey School in Reading, an establishment counting Jane Austen among its pupils. At twenty she published her first novel, *The Traditions*, a work of Romantic moralism. More than four hundred titles would follow until her death in 1851, among these writing on astronomy, geography, fable and religion, as well as *School and Family Stories*. Of these, the best remembered is probably *The Fairchild Family*, a novel shaped by the Evangelical conversion Sherwood experienced in her late twenties.

<2>In 1803, Sherwood, then Mary Butts, had married her cousin, Henry Sherwood, a Captain in the 53rd Regiment of Foot. Two years later, the regiment was ordered to India, where the family remained for ten years. Travelling with her infant son, Sherwood’s experience of poverty and “paganism,” and the influence of a new breed of “serious” Company Chaplains, resulted in “a well developed Evangelical urge” finding itself “crystallized into action” (Cutt 2).(1) This commitment to charitable works and missionary conversion increasingly found expression in her published work, especially after the death of her son in 1807. Despite a rediscovery of doctrinal moderation in the last years of her life, Evangelism would remain the motivating force behind her writing.

<3>It is, perhaps, the stern and unforgiving Calvinism evidenced in *The Fairchild Family*

that has led to Sherwood's work suffering unfavorable comparisons with the liberalism of contemporaries such as Catherine Sinclair.⁽²⁾ The text is often understood to typify a position in which "life was so short, eternity yawned beyond the grave; responsible adults must strive to find ways of impressing upon the young the sense of their moral nature," a message "repeated over and over again, and with urgent eloquence" (Avery 105).⁽³⁾ Yet for all the seeming certainty of such repetition, the text can be read in terms of a resistance to the resolution of its constitutive tensions, not least that between its sustained self-lacerating introspection and unflagging sense of moral entitlement.⁽⁴⁾

<4>It is a tension that may also be read in Sherwood's various attempts at life writing. There are many instances in the diaries in which an anxiety over the accuracy of the text may be read, a concern that a certain passage contains too much detail or not enough, that it is too personal, trivial, or imperfectly recalled. Here it might seem that Sherwood's allegiance to a patriarchal world view threatens to subvert her commitment to the truthful and purposeful documentation of her own experience, resulting in what could be understood as a persistent questioning of her own creative ability.

<5>This is a familiar tension in the history of female autobiography. Leigh Gilmore accounts for the uncertainty of the authorial position she reads in female life writing by charting the origins of the form in Catholic confession. For Gilmore, this institution allows women to narrate their lives, yet only if they are able to conform to a normative idea of "female" experience understood in an appropriately "female" way. A failure in self-representation can lead to the rejection of a claim and has the potential to be met with violence. Gilmore claims that the influence of confession upon female autobiography can be read in the way its practitioners can "exhibit [...] a tremendous anxiety [...] to 'get it right'":

The confession, I would argue, installs the production of gender as truth effect; one tells the truth insofar as one produces gendered identity appropriately. In this sense the confession hypostatizes gender, condenses the difference among women into an institutional whole and enforces that construction. For this reason I would locate [...] the pressure to 'get it right' in the confession's simultaneous construction of truth and torture and of self-representation and self-incrimination in relation to gender. (Gilmore 60)

<6>This essay will suggest that Mary Martha Sherwood's autobiographical writing can be characterized by precisely this desire to "get it right". Yet it will also contend that a comparative study of Sherwood's Biblical scholarship can lead to a contrary

interpretation of her autobiographical “anxiety”. Despite echoing the patriarchal and Evangelical structure of her autobiography, Sherwood’s scriptural interpretation can be understood to bestow upon female autobiography the certainty and stability of Divine Truth. This is because such Truth is formed through the very self-reflective, inter-connected and repetitious narrative that Sherwood utilizes in the production of autobiographical doubt. On these terms, the structure of anxiety enables the articulation of a subversive self-valorization.

II: The Autobiographies of Mary Sherwood

<7>Mary Sherwood produced three autobiographies during her lifetime. From 1805 she kept a private diary, its entries composed shortly after the events they describe. This initial “Indian diary” or “Indian journal” is not available to the present day researcher, only surviving as extended quotations within a subsequent commentary upon it.⁽⁵⁾ This second document, once again unpublished, is known as the *Family Journal* and covers the seventy-five years of her life in twenty hand written volumes.⁽⁶⁾ When in her seventies, Sherwood was persuaded to produce an edited version of this work with the intention of publication but died before the task could be completed. Her daughter, Sophia Kelly, was left with the responsibility of producing a final draft. Kelly engaged in an extensive revision of the *Family Journal* before publishing it as *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* in 1854. Kelly justified the degree of her editorial intervention by stating that she “perceived that these papers were but too faithful records of past events [...] too domestic, too sacred, a character too openly revealed” (Sherwood 1854 iv). Sherwood is often in sympathy with her daughter on this issue. The danger of disclosing private information is a recurrent theme in her work, addressed at length in stories such as ‘The Old Woman’s Tale’, as well as sections of *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* that have been transferred unaltered from the original *Family Journal*.⁽⁷⁾ Thus, on many occasions the narrator of *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* refuses to disclose a particularly painful fact of feeling, claiming that “where one has suffered much, one cannot linger in discourse, for there are certain feelings that must be avoided and suppressed” (114).

<8>*The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* is not consistent in its objection to the publication of private discourse. Indeed, its critics have often focused on Sherwood’s tendency to dwell on tragic events, the prolonged dissection of “certain feelings” of anguish, grief and guilt.⁽⁸⁾ For an example, we might turn to Sherwood’s description of a journal entry written after the death of her son, its concern being with the morality of communicating the details of the child’s death to a general public:

I have myself lived to feel how very valuable every recollection of my parents

is to me - especially any notion of their private lives and private feelings & how grieved I should be if any such little histories as these which I have of a baby brother or Sister whom no one of them ever saw – had been rashly thrown away - & even supposing, what I cannot suppose that the minute accounts of the lives and deaths of these babies have no interest for their surviving brother or sister yet surely these things cannot be without interest when made manifest as it presently will be that behind this there were such purposes of mercy as no human wisdom can apprehend. (Sherwood 1812)

<9>Detail, the “minute account,” is read as something that is important for family knowledge, being domestic, private and of little “interest”.⁽⁹⁾ Yet it is also argued that such minute detail is the sign of a hidden purpose. In reading detail one gains a notion of the “little histories” as well as that which is ‘behind’ them. The uninteresting and specific is there to give access to something of general interest. This latter feature is made ‘manifest’ by the explanation to come. There is a promise of it having the physical properties granted to the text it transcends. Yet despite this tangible quality it is something that escapes understanding through the futurity of its manifestation, its present incomprehensibility, and the subsequent qualification that

By many persons it will be thought that my grief for Henry was inordinate – I do not dispute this point – I am not writing these memoirs to prove myself a faultless person – my wish is to state the truth, as I find it in my Indian journal, and it is with this object that I introduce many little things which self-love would persuade me to keep in the background. (Sherwood 1854 329)

<10>Sherwood records her child’s dying words to be “mamma, mamma, remember Henry,” (Sherwood 1812) a cry she seems determined to answer. This remembrance is to be “the truth,” rather than the false or the sentimental. This “truth” must be repeated exactly, everything must be included, even when it might seem irrelevant or cast Sherwood at “fault.”

<11>Whenever a death is narrated in the *Family Journal*, the manuscript upon which *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* is based, Sherwood always declares that she must do away with mature, reflective commentary in exchange for extensive quotations from her “Indian diary.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Thus a commentary on the death of Henry ends with “here I copy my memorandums word for word as I wrote them” (Sherwood 1849 – 50). This constructs the “memorandum” as the “truthful” account of the event. This notion is helped by the juxtaposition of two different styles of writing, the emotional, exclamatory and repetitive “memorandums,” and the subsequent sober commentary upon them.

Sherwood will interrupt a quotation from the “Indian journal” with a brief comment or aside before returning to it in a most jarring fashion:

After this hymn my journal thus proceeds the account of the Saturday before the little ones death thus continues – ‘sweet, sweet child, Oh! That I could recall every look of that child...’ [...]

‘Oh my sweet, sweet child – and were you ever mine & are you torn from me forever.- There follows a number of rules of conduct which vary but little from that which have gone before. (Sherwood 1808 – 06)

<12>Here we have a notion of an unflinching desire to record feelings just as they were, the “dispassionate” commentary legitimizing the past emotion. An appeal is made to self-control that nonetheless allows an outpouring of grief. Certain phrases such as “Oh! My Baby!” are repeated throughout the text. Here there is an idea of an unchanging expression of grief, suggesting both a feeling that does not fade and the perfection of its expression, hence a need for exact quotation. Just as certain phrases are repeated, so too certain scenes. The death of Little Henry is commented upon throughout the *Family Journal* and subsequent events, especially those of a tragic nature, are read through it (Sherwood 1849-50). Sherwood makes reference to the repetitive quality of the work, suggesting that “it might be curious to consider how many times these very same expressions & confessions & acknowledgments have been recorded in my Journal” (Sherwood 1812).

<13>The “truth” of the “Indian Journal” is also constructed through the accumulation of detailed description. Sherwood, as indicated above, reads her grief as ‘inordinate’ and she wishes to communicate this fault exactly. Thus she chooses a language of excessive ‘minute’ detail featuring prolonged and repeated descriptions of clothing and environment, offering sustained meditations on “the fair corpse [wearing] a delicate Holland cap with a white rose – with a frill round the neck” (Sherwood 1854 275). Sherwood claims that despite their excess, such descriptions are an accurate record of objective detail as well as a true representation of original, falsifying emotions. There is no doubt in her assertion that she “could recall every look of my child” (265).

<14>Sherwood is not always so positive in her ability to offer a truthful account, however, often asking herself “how shall I state the case as I conceive it to have been? How can I possibly do it?” (126) Writing is taken to be an impediment to truth as well as constituted by it. One difficulty in this formulation may be read in the quotation above concerning “inordinate” grief, that the “truth” being written through Sherwood’s use of

extensive self-quotation is not that of “life” but that to be “found” in the “Indian journal”. The compulsion to completeness is one that is centered on the total repetition of a text, not the recollection of “life”. So we read that “it seems from my journal that we sailed on the 14th sept. from Singapore” (315). Proximity does not always guarantee a truthful account, as the “Indian journal” is written by a person with “faults”. Yet it is claimed that the amount of time that passed between the writing of the original diary and the composition of the *Family Journal* has helped their author move away from erroneous first impressions, Sherwood stating that “I have been gradually brought to see the truth in a point of view which is luminous indeed, and bright as day, when compared with the twilight ray that I first discerned” (Sherwood 1849 – 50). Thus the original diaries offer a limited vision of events. Somehow time has allowed the missing parts of that vision to be returned. The “Indian journal” lacks an awareness of what is to come as well as constituting a flawed account of what has passed, “little very, very little did I understand when I wrote up my memorandums to this point in the narrative of my life – of the awful circumstances under which I should reside” (ibid.). Just as subsequent commentary is necessary to illuminate the gaps in prior understanding, however, so the “Indian journal” is required to fill the gaps in memory, thus “where I have no journal to direct me, though I can recall many, many facts, I cannot remember much of anything that I thought” (Sherwood 1854 161).

III: Bible History: or, Scripture its own Interpreter

<15>According to Sherwood, there is a certain kind of writing that contains none of the problems with representation and truth evidenced in her various autobiographies. This writing is that to be read in *The Bible*. If we can establish what Sherwood claims a perfect text to be, we may be better placed to understand how her texts construct themselves as falling short of the ideal.

<16>Sherwood claims that God has “made himself manifest in the divine scripture”(Sherwood 1849- 50). *The Bible* is God, and God is he “who had no fault in him” (Sherwood 1819 126). Biblical language absolutely succeeds in representation, literally being the perfection that it communicates. Yet the word is not such an inclusive and self-sufficient truth that it can be understood only on its own terms. Sherwood’s *Bible History: or, Scripture its Own Interpreter* (11) acknowledges that *The Bible* is a written text and as such it can be misinterpreted. She claims that if one has not been inspired by the Holy Spirit the words of *The Bible* will have little meaning, as “reading *The Bible* without prayer is of very little use unless the spirit of God makes us understand *The Bible*, we may read it all our lives and know nothing of it” (Sherwood 1823 29).

<17>The Evangelical writing that Sherwood supports is invested in the “literal” truth of *The Bible*. Yet as the question of Biblical truth is not inclusive to that text, in that the debate about Biblical meaning is located outside of *The Bible* among its mortal readers, there is a difficulty in deciding on what the “literal” is to be taken to be. Sherwood is angered by those who interpret *The Bible* with “subtle and ensnaring sophistry” (ix). This interpretability is not read as an inevitable feature of the language in which *The Bible* is written. Rather, it is claimed to be the product of Biblical interpretation itself.

Interpretation is taken to be an excessive, distracting supplement to that which should itself be complete. According to Sherwood, this trend may be countered by recognising the strength of “the most unlettered believer who keeps to his Bible alone” (ix).

“Unlettered” appeals to both the lack of education of the ideal reader and his limited understanding of language. It is claimed that Sherwood’s Evangelical writing and the reading of the “unlettered believer” do not supplement *The Bible* as other works of “sophistry” do. Instead they draw attention to *The Bible* “itself,” which both is and is not constituted by language. Evangelical writing must not read itself as reading *The Bible*. Despite the fact it may be misinterpreted, *The Bible* must be constructed as something that may be experienced by the Evangelist without being altered in any way by that experience. The Evangelist must have access to the unmediated Word.

<18>What may seem an already difficult argument is complicated further by the claim that a reader cannot passively gain the truth from *The Bible*. *The Bible* must be actively engaged with, “Give me grace, then, Lord, to search for thee everywhere in the sacred word” (20). So the truth is not simply “there”. It must be searched for in an ongoing and repetitive process of textual examination, with Sherwood urging “the truly reflecting reader” to “turn to it again and again” (106). God is everywhere in “the word,” but “the word” must still be searched through to uncover the presence of God. If this is the case, the “unlettered” believer must read and study the text. She cannot simply grasp some mystic, transcendent meaning. Even so, interpretation of *The Bible* is only ever a flawed and human act of sophistry.

<19>What is now an impossible situation may be further complicated by the appeal to “the spirit of God” introduced above. “The word” is not true in itself. It is not enough to go unlettered into the language of God, neither is it sufficient to engage with a prolonged reading of text as “from a child” Sherwood “had read the word of God, and that word is truth; but [...] had not the moral capacity to receive anything more than a historical view of it” (116 – 117). Here the child’s reading that requires only the “basic narrative” of the “historical” is read as a failure. The word is “truth,” yet is comprehended only as “facts”. *The Bible*’s true meaning is one that can be grasped by the “unlettered”

yet the unlettered child reads only simply facts, being ignorant of the presence of some higher truth. What the child lacks is the power of “reflection”:

The reader of reflection and consideration, if proceeding from a right principle, viz. *the love of Christ*, will need no apology, for what to more general readers might, on a superficial view, appear an unnecessarily long digression. The writer would here again repeat, that all reading which is not blessed by the soul, is not only useless but dangerous, and that the Holy Scriptures alone are ‘able to make wise unto the Salvation, through faith that is in Christ Jesus’. How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? (31 – 32)

<20>If accompanied by inspiration, reflection is to be praised, despite the notion that the text “alone” can grant salvation. Sherwood repeats, writes at length and digresses. This is a writing that could “appear” to the “superficial” observer as something it is not. When *The Bible* has a “fullness” in writing it is not an unworthy quality of excessive and inclusive detail:

The following description [of Passover] is so full of Gospel, that I must solicit my readers attention, most particularly to it; but unless his heart is penetrated by the sovereign energy of the holy spirit, a Saviour as living, agonizing in the garden, dying on the cross for him the chief of sinners: he cannot appreciate the merciful institution of this Passover. (40)

<21>“Fullness” in meaning is not simply in the text. The “fullness” is a quality that might be missed by the inattentive, something separate from the purely descriptive. This “fullness,” existing beyond the apparent narrative, is read as “scripture language [which is] transcendent”:

That sublime description, peculiar to the sacred oracles, must not only be read, but well considered to be understood; and in proportion as the intelligent and pious mind enters its soul – transforming contents, will be the avidity and delight still to investigate, discover, admire and wonder, till increasingly convinced of its divinity it gratefully exclaims, “this is the word of God.” (13)

<22>The proof that the text is self-present is the very fact that it is not. Total inclusion is the mark not of a materialistic sensibility, but of escape. That is to say the Evangelist understands that she is reading the word of God because she has read a text that

initially seems unburdened by any higher meaning. It is only through “reflective” “investigating” of the text that it may be “transformed” into what it really is. “Sublimity” in writing becomes the guarantor of self-present truth, and only “fullness” of meaning can point to the gap of the sublime.

IV: The Tabernacle

<23>One passage of *Bible History* might be used to read such ideas in a little more detail. There is a sequence in which an account of the building of the tabernacle in the Old Testament is compared to the life of Christ in the New. Sherwood notes that the “tabernacle” is written of in “minute detail” (Sherwood 1823 130). This detail brings “comfort” because “the Redeemer” says when writing of the tabernacle “Moses wrote of me” (130). The detailed tabernacle passage is claimed as a commentary on the New Testament which itself offers a commentary on the tabernacle. The problem for *Bible History* is that many readings of *The Bible* neglect such passages:

How often has the description of the tabernacle, so minutely and particularly described by Jehovah himself to Moses [...] been past over [...] [We must] attend more and more to the Bible as a *whole*, to perceive that like a well constructed edifice or building every part is connected, inseparably united bears upon the whole [...] rising majestically whilst resting on a solid foundation. (130)

<24>Biblical meaning is always reliant on something else. Each passage of *The Bible* is incomplete, requiring its every other passage. The metaphor of the edifice allows a notion of the text as a physical object, one that can be viewed in its entirety. *The Bible* is read as a structure standing solid and self-supported, entirely independent of any interpretation of it. It lacks nothing. Or, rather, any weakness in one aspect of its structure is compensated by strength in another. Indeed, the very strength of the structure comes from this initial idea of support, a notion that points to the insufficiency of each discrete part. What we have is a reading of a text wherein the stability of meaning is reliant upon it being present and absent in one instance. In the text meaning can never simply be self-present, because it is always dependent on something else. Jesus’ words are dependent on those of Moses and vice versa. Yet this notion of lack is turned into one of self-contained fullness, sublimity as part of a larger object that can be viewed in its entirety in an instant.

<25>The very incompleteness of a certain Biblical passage is that which guarantees the totality of *The Bible*. This is the notion of *The Bible* being “its Own Interpreter”. *Bible*

History is confronted with a difficulty. *The Bible* must be simply true. Yet people still misinterpret it. This is accounted for by the claim that the truth of *The Bible* is only made present to those who have been inspired and those who look to *The Bible* alone. Yet still the problem remains as there is a notion of the truth of *The Bible* that is separate from any reading of it. *The Bible* lacks the ability to communicate the divine truth in a guaranteed and unmediated way because readers of *The Bible* are human, flawed and likely to misinterpret. The solution is to have *The Bible* read itself. *The Bible* becomes both text and reader. Because *The Bible* is divine it has a reading of itself that is without flaw, despite this suggesting a need for confirmation indicative of a lack of certainty. The idea is to keep the notion of *The Bible* and a reading of it as separate identities. An Evangelist, though human and flawed, may read *The Bible's* reading of itself, which must be Divine because Biblical, yet accessible because a reading.

<26>Sherwood argues that it is the “particular” detail in the description of “the tabernacle” that suggests that it is actually concerned with something else. It is the “minuteness” of the description of its structure that indicates that what a “superficial reader” will not find “interesting” is actually the sign of an absent “true meaning,” the sign of significance, the indication of metaphor. The truth is that which is unavailable in a specific instance. In the introduction *The Infants Progress*, an allegorical work, Sherwood writes

Long sermons have been preached [...] Children cannot understand these grave and elaborate discourses [...] Now as nuts and almonds are hidden under rough shells, and as honey is concealed in the bells of cups and flowers; so there is a hidden meaning in every part of my allegory, which I hope you will be able to draw forth for profit. (Sherwood 1825 iii – iv)

<27>Again there is the idea that “the true meaning” of a text is that which is hidden. This is a text that hides a truth in “every part,” just as God is “everywhere in the sacred word.”

V: The Autobiographical Edifice

<28>With this in mind we may return to the account of Little Henry's death in *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood*. Read through one narrative within the *Family Journal*, this is an account of an “inordinate” grief rendered in a suitably excessive style. It indicates a superfluous and limited understanding. Read through a different narrative in the same text, the death of Little Henry may be read as “family interest,” there to supply knowledge of relations that would otherwise be lost. It is the very stuff through which

someone may be known. It may, however, also be read as the sign that something greater is being talked about. The *Family Journal* also reads the detail of Little Henry's death as indicating an ineffable "wisdom" that exists outside of the minute description, just as *Bible History*'s proposes a divine truth to be indicated by the detailed description of "the tabernacle."

<29>There are other ways in which the narration of Henry's death may be compared to the construction of Biblical truth in *Bible History*. The "Little Henry" passage has already been read as referenced throughout both the *Family Journal* and *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood*. As we have seen, Sherwood recognizes this repetitious quality in the *Family Journal*, the text returning to the same events, quoting lengthy descriptions of them from other sources, constantly "reflecting" upon them. In *Bible History*, Sherwood states that "Christians [should] read their Bibles thus deeply, experimentally, and with such an holy delightful perseverance" (Sherwood 1823 160). Evangelists should patiently read the same passages of text in as many different ways as possible. In this the Evangelist may discover the truth of events.

<30>We have also already read how the many commentaries on the "Little Henry" passage declare themselves flawed. Throughout the *Family Journal* there is an idea that the "Indian journal" lacks the maturity of reflection and fails to understand fundamental Christian truths, while still demanding to be quoted with total accuracy. This is because it represents the truth of the moment in a way no subsequent commentary could ever hope to achieve. In the *Family Journal* Sherwood condemns the conflicting feelings and impressions produced by certain events:

And yet on the very next page or paragraph, with that strange inconsistency which belongs to man I find myself seeking some good in that which I have confessed to be altogether filthy – as if the clean could proceed from the unclean - and that which is pure and precious from corruption. (Sherwood 1840)

<31>One text is pointing to the flaws in another. On other occasions the same text will point to its own insufficiency, indicating that a complete account of events is located somewhere else, Sherwood noting that "a very long letter written to my sister and a very minute account of Henry's death will be found in the collection [of Sherwood's correspondence]" (Sherwood 1806 – 08). Occasionally Sherwood will indicate a flaw in a text whilst pointing to a lack of understanding in another, "I cannot say exactly at what time but it was either in the month of may or june that one day in conversation with Mr Parson – I betrayed my total ignorance as respecting the doctrine of human depravity"

(Ibid.). The truth claims of both “Indian diary” and *Family Journal* are questioned at the same time. There are many occasions where the distinction between the two is unclear as both texts exist as part of one text, the *Family Journal*. The notion of a temporal and temperamental difference between the prior emotionalism and subsequent calm cannot be sustained, thus the prevalence of impassioned “reflection” (“oh my Henry my precious Boy – how shall I now go on with my history and retrace the events of your short life my lovely my redeemed one” [Ibid.]), and the past collapsing into its recollection (“my diary of the next day is full of touching reminiscences of the year before” [Ibid.])

<32>Let us conclude. *The Family Journal* describes events in “inordinate” detail but when it does so it also claims to be communicating transcendent truth. In this it is just like *The Bible* as read by *Bible History*. *The Family Journal* includes at least two kinds of texts, the “Indian journal” and subsequent commentary, as well as detailed description and sublime truth. All may be read as commenting on or supplementing the other. In this it is also just like *The Bible* as read by *Bible History*. Each part of the *Family Journal* may be read as lacking something, hence the need for supplementary commentary. Again, this is just like *Bible History*’s reading of *The Bible*. Finally, all these different commentaries make up one body of work, just as they do in *The Bible* as read by *Bible History*. The *Family Journal* sets itself up as “Its Own Interpreter” just as *The Bible* read by *Bible History*.

VI: Conclusion

<33>Certainly, the narrator’s confusion, her constantly flouted desire to “get it right,” can successfully be read in terms of a power effect, with the truth claims offered by *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* constituted and constrained by the “confessional” structure of female autobiography.⁽¹²⁾ Yet this text may also be read as a self-valorizing statement. For an Evangelist, it would seem, no linguistic self-representation may be as true as the word of God. From studying *Bible History* it may be argued that it is in its very failure to be true that *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood* gains the truth status it modestly seeks to distance itself from. That is to say, in its moments of profoundest self-questioning it takes on qualities it attributes to the perfection of scriptural writing. Sherwood’s remembrance of “Little Henry” is as true as the word of God precisely because every single part of it can never be so.

Endnotes

(1)See M. Nancy Cutt for the standard biographical reading of Sherwood and her

texts.(^)

(2)Although the subversive potential of the text has been noted by Thwaite, 64 – 65, and Kate Montagnon, 272.(^)

(3)For a reading of Sherwood as didactic and Evangelical, see Avery. Avery is interested in engaging with the complexity of Sherwood's position, offering a nuanced reading of her post-Victorian popularity.(^)

(4)See Labbe for an additional reading of Sherwood as specifically a didactic and Evangelical writer. Labbe's account is a subtle reading of Sherwood's place within wider Evangelical discourses.(^)

(5)Both titles are used within the *Family Journal*.(^)

(6)This diary is currently held in the Special Collection of Children's Literature a UCLA. I was initially able to research this document at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA as part of a Mitzi Myers scholarship. I concentrate on only three volumes of this vast work, 1806-1808, 1812 and 1849-50. Each of these document particularly difficult times in Sherwood's life.(^)

(7)An original copy of this text can be found in the Shrewsbury Library, England. It is undated. It is available online at <http://www3.shropshire-cc.gov.uk/etexts/E000344.htm> (2010).(^)

(8)See Royde Smith for an example of this.(^)

(9)For the definitive work on the detail as part of a gendered discourse, see Schor.(^)

(10)For more on this notion of multiple texts and their construction of discourses of identity, see Nussbaum, 201 – 224.(^)

(11)M. Nancy Cutt does not list this as a Sherwood text. UCLA classifies it as a Sherwood text.(^)

(12)Again, I make the point that this is not to dismiss Gilmore formulation. I refer to Gilmore because I read her as articulating a precise model of the enabling conditions of autobiography. I am not suggesting that there is anything necessarily flawed about that model. For another subtle reading of the notion of constraint in the construction of female autobiography, see Carolyn Steedman's account of patriarchal constraint in

terms of deferred action.(△)

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