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## PERFORMING THE AUTHOR/MOTHER/ MERCHANT /WIFE - MOVING SUBJECT POSITIONS IN MINNA CANTH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Tuija Saaresma

### Abstract

Reading autobiography as a performative act enables for the analysis of processes involved in constructing the self. It provides a space for analysing the ways in which gender, nationality, and other social locations of the subject are negotiated. In this article, I read the famous Finnish nineteenth-century playwright and author Minna Canth's concise autobiography, focusing on various locations of the autobiographical subject in this rather laconic matter-of-fact text. My reading follows current trends in feminist autobiographical theorising as well as feminist politics of reading. I strive to deconstruct the interpretation of autobiographies as dichotomously fixed texts. I suggest a more flexible reading that would take the ambiguities of the genre seriously, such as describing both the public and the private life of the author, constructing the subject of the narrative, both relational and autonomous, in addition to varying stylistically between mere factuality and decorative description. Such a reading takes into account the shifts of the subject positions as well as the styles of narration moving between feminine and masculine, rational and emotional, chronologically organised progress of the plot and a more vague way of organising the narrative according to the inner logic or the unconscious. In analysing the variations of narration, inspired by the theoretical and methodological discussion on intersectionality, I conceptualize autobiography as a site for negotiating and performing various subject positions, thus striving for a non-essential reading of autobiographies.

Keywords: autobiography, feminine and masculine style, gender, intersectionality, Minna Canth, narration, nationality, performativity, politics of reading, subject positions.

## 1 Minna Canth – a short biography

Minna Canth (1844–1897) has been canonised as one of Finland’s national authors. Besides actively publishing novels, short stories, drama, and pamphlets, she was the pioneer of the suffragette movement and of women’s education. As one of the key figures of the young nation, her effigies have been set up both in Jyväskylä, the town of her alma mater, and Kuopio, where she lived most of her life. There is no doubt about the value of Minna Canth for Finnish national identity, including the widely shared and cherished ideal of gender equality. In 2007, her birthday, March 19, was nominated as an official Flag Day and Equality day. Such a symbolic decision further strengthens her value as the representative of Finnish equality.

Both in her private and public life, Minna Canth encountered numerous vicissitudes. Born in Tampere, Ulrika Wilhelmina Johanson, to be known as Miss Miina and later as Minna Canth, was her father’s favourite child. Growing up in a middle-class home that valued education also for girls, and inspired by the idea of popular enlightenment, she found her purpose in life through teaching. In 1863, she commenced her studies at the then brand-new teacher seminar in Jyväskylä. In contrast to her plans of dedicating her life to teaching, she married lecturer Johan Ferdinand Canth in 1865.

As a young wife and a mother with not many options, she gave up her career in education, raised children and took care of the household. Being a dedicated homemaker left her with a sense of life somewhat unfulfilled, and she grew tired of not being able to participate in intellectual conversations of the era. She then started subscribing to her husband’s newspaper, and started writing fiction and drama. Suddenly, pregnant with their seventh child, she was widowed and plunged into economic insecurity.

Fighting poverty, Minna took the lead of her parents’ shop in Kuopio to provide for the family. Besides mothering and homemaking, she also published articles of topical issues as well as drama, novels, and short stories. She soon became a celebrity of the time. However, some of her writings were received with hostility: strong opposition was expressed both toward her pamphlets on women’s issues and abstinence, and her fiction, which was claimed to address what was considered inappropriate subjects, such as the rights of women or the proletariat. She was known to have had mental problems and most likely suffered from depression. After a turbulent life, Minna Canth died of a heart attack, on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1897. Posthumously, her productions have been valued as being ahead of their time. She subsequently became a national celebrity and a token of equality between genders.

The biographical details have been constantly repeated by the media, educators, historians, politics and literary scholars, when narrating Minna Canth into the young nation’s intellectual canon. Narrating is a powerful means of performing the nation. The shared and repeated narratives and myths about Finnishness and the national canon become naturalised, influencing the self-

understanding of the nation.<sup>38</sup> The biographical facts of Minna Canth's life, partly based on what she chooses to tell in her autobiography, bring forth the confrontation between the demands of private and public, between the educative vocation, the artistic desire, and the conventions of mothering. My emphasis in this article is not the referential factual value of the details about the narrator's life events<sup>39</sup>, but the ways in which autobiography organises and constructs experiences whilst performing gender and nationality by repeating and undoing certain aspects of both in textual acts of narration, thus deconstructing their naturalness.<sup>40</sup>

Not surprisingly, gender seems to be one of the main principles of organising the life of Minna Canth. It is common to narrate the story of the emerging author in terms of hard work and striving for understanding, on top of having to constantly deal with economic insecurity. However, unlike most writers of the time, another great disadvantage experienced by Minna Canth was incurred by her gender. The editor of the volume featuring Minna Canth's writings in the influential series of books *Kodin suuret klassikot*, Ilpo Tiitinen, mentions that the greatest obstacle faced by Minna Canth in being a writer was gender:

At that time, it was not thought that being a writer was something a woman could do; on the contrary, hers were the spheres of private, the somewhat closeted life of home, although incorporated with the broad obligations of a housewife and a mother.<sup>41</sup>

Tiitinen continues with his argument as follows:

On the contrary, the life sphere of a writer was publicity. The upbringing of Minna Canth was leading her to privacy. Leaving the private sphere, natural-born for women, and moving to the public arena, was difficult also for the environment, for public opinion. It was not accepted.<sup>42</sup>

In the autobiography of Minna Canth (1891), this conflict between the roles – or, as I prefer, the various subject positions – become distinct. I read the autobiography to analyse the various subject positions that are possible for the writer, representative of a certain gender, class, or nationality, and how they interchange and collide. My purpose, thus, is not to find out who Minna Canth “really” was, but to make visible the performative power of autobiography and the way in which gender and other hierarchically organised social structures, such as nationality, are constructed not as monoliths but as shifting, negotiable positions in the text. In order to specify the various locations for the autobiographical subject, I highlight two alternative sub-plots in the autobiography, which are built on a variety of subject positions, such as: teacher, journalist, suffragette feminist, mother of seven, young widow, successful

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<sup>38</sup> Gordon, Komulainen & Lempiäinen 2002a, 12.

<sup>39</sup> The question of truth has been widely discussed in autobiography theory; see e. g. Roos 1994; Bauman 2000; Bertaux 2003; Liljeström 2004; Saresma 2005; Saresma 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Butler 1999; Lempiäinen 2002, 19; Pulkkinen & Rossi 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Tiitinen 1987, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

businesswoman, and opinion leader of the time. I am interested in how the subject positions confront one another, yet at the same time co-operate in the autobiography.

When I refer to the “real” historical figure, I use the name Minna Canth. When speaking of Minna, I refer to the autobiographical subject – the textual construction of the narrated ‘I’ – that can be read in the autobiography. The latter is the focus of this article. Before going into the narratives available in the autobiography, I take a brief look at the theoretical discussions about autobiography, gender and intersectionality.

## 2 Autobiographical acts as intersecting performances of gender

The literary production of Minna Canth has been widely researched. My article is not intended to be a contribution to research on her fiction. The autobiography of Minna Canth, a laconic 7-page-text, is a rather modest version of a “portrait of the artist”, not an ambitious artistic piece like James Joyce’s, *Portrait of the artist as a young man*.<sup>43</sup> Despite its conciseness, Minna Canth’s autobiography is a touching narrative about a woman struggling with her duties as a wife and mother, and about the need for self-expression through writing. It is about a woman fighting for her right to take part in public discussions and intellectual arguments of the time. It can and has been read as a depiction of increasing equality in addition to women gaining independence and autonomy. Originally, the autobiography was published in a Norwegian journal *Samtiden*, and has been published in Finnish in several journals. It is also available on the Internet.<sup>44</sup>

I am interested in the subject positions available for the autobiographical ‘I’ on the textual level. My purpose is to use Minna Canth’s autobiography to “raise a number of broad issues of interest to the study of (...) autobiography in general.”<sup>45</sup> Autobiographical writing is in feminist reading often conceptualized as liberating for women<sup>46</sup>, or making oneself seen and heard<sup>47</sup>, and an act of conscious political statement<sup>48</sup>. Women’s autobiographical writing “offers them an opportunity to express themselves as ‘subjects’ with their own selfhood”, whereas “patriarchal cultures have categorized women as ‘objects’”, as feminist historian Marianne Liljeström suggests.<sup>49</sup> Choosing Minna Canth’s autobiography as the material of my analysis also follows emancipatory and feminist epistemological, plus political ambitions. In my reading I strive for the idea that gender does not have to be constructed – or, studied – in a fixed way.

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<sup>43</sup> See Kelly 2000, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Canth 1891.  
[http://fi.wikisource.org/wiki/Minna\\_Canth\\_\(omael%C3%A4m%C3%A4kerta](http://fi.wikisource.org/wiki/Minna_Canth_(omael%C3%A4m%C3%A4kerta)

<sup>45</sup> Kelly 2000, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Jokinen 1996; Sääskilahti 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Liljeström 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Kaskisaari 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Liljeström 2004, 67.

On the contrary, I want to emphasize the negotiating of the subject by highlighting the variety of (gendered) subject positions available for narration during the turn of the century, one hundred years ago. Thus, research should not limit itself to essential presuppositions, such as monolithic gender-specific ways of constructing the subject or organising narration.

I take autobiography as a genre and also this specific piece of text as “a representation of discourses of truth, gender and power”, not “as evidence of historical facts and events.”<sup>50</sup> Instead of taking the autobiography of Minna Canth as my “data” and analysing it thoroughly, I use it as an example of how gender and nationality are performed in autobiographical writing. Thus, I read the autobiography not as a final result or a work of art, but as an act. Autobiography is thus conceptualized as a process. To me, it is not a referential, documentary record of “what really happened” but a performative act that makes things happen, constructs the subject, produces the ‘I’ of the narrative. However, autobiography is never an isolated text. Instead, it is always in interplay with political, social and cultural factors of the time of its writing – as well as with the readers’ communities and histories.

In autobiography, powerful ideological work is performed: autobiographies “have been assimilated into political agendas, have fostered the doctrine of individualism, and have participated in the construction and codification of gendered personhood.”<sup>51</sup> In autobiographical studies, the autonomous subject of the narrative has been celebrated, and to contrast this individual masculine hero of the canonised, rationally constructed autobiography, a relational, fuzzy, feminine subject of a not-so-logical diary has been constructed<sup>52</sup>– even though this dichotomy has been widely criticized as well.<sup>53</sup>

Historically, autobiographical writing has been “a male domain, a genre where above all ‘already known’ or famous men write their reminiscences, positioning themselves in a *déjà lu*”, as Marianne Liljeström has it.<sup>54</sup> This has meant that women writers have not only been exceptional, but that their character has been “presented on the basis of an interesting asymmetrical gender paradox: an exceptional man is essentially like other men. Other men can become exceptional. Exceptional women, however, are usually perceived as different from other women (see Miller 1994, 16).”<sup>55</sup> Due to an analogous mechanism, nationality is also, despite the universalistic and gender neutral surface, predefined as masculine. Thus, women’s relation to nation state is problematic, as women are located on the margins of the nation state.<sup>56</sup> Discrepancies between assumed gender neutrality and experienced inequality become vividly illustrated in the way the subject of Minna Canth’s

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Gusdorf 1956/1980; Friedman 1988.

<sup>53</sup> Hyvärinen, Peltonen & Vilkkö 1998; Saresma 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Liljeström 2004, 64.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, Komulainen & Lempiäinen 2002a, 13.

autobiography is represented through her gender: her braveness and strength as a successful shopkeeper due to her husband's death. Becoming a widow placed Minna Canth in an extraordinary position between the so-called masculine (public) and feminine (private) spheres of life: besides raising seven children, she made a career as a merchant, and was one of the time's leading intellectuals. Acting in so many fields of life is absolutely exceptional for a woman, thus, as a subject of the national narrative, Minna Canth is constructed as unique among women.

If we take the gendered nature of the autobiography as a given, then female writers have had to choose either the masculine way of representing themselves as "one of the men", or failing that, an extraordinary woman. This uncommonness is performed in Minna's narrative as well, although it does not feature as the entire story of the autobiography. The subject of the autobiography is also presented as any woman, feeling inadequate in her role as a wife and mother, yet coping with the everyday routines. The subject is depicted in relation to other people: she is a daughter, a wife, a mother. At the same time, there is additionally the individual facet of the creative genius fighting for the right to say what she perceives as being her obligation to say – the exceptional person willing to sacrifice her domestic peace and life for art and ideology.

The questions of the autonomy or relationality of the autobiographical subject, as well as the feminine or masculine style of the autobiography have been widely discussed<sup>57</sup> and are not the subject of this article. However, I would like to raise the question of whether gender – to be more specific, femaleness – is such a dominant feature of the subject, or would it be more fruitful to read the alteration of the gender positions in the text? In this, I follow the argumentation of Marianne Liljeström:

In order to analyse gendered authority and hierarchy, interpretation must attend to the cultural and discursive histories of self-representation, rather than to some overarching explanation for the gender differences between autobiographies written by men or women (see Miller 1994 and Gilmore 1994).<sup>58</sup>

Thus, I am interested in autobiography as a site for negotiating the subject's positioning between feminine and masculine, between autonomous and relational, as well as between private and public. Through the shifts in the subject's positioning within the realms of private and public and in between, I strive to analyse the processes of negotiating gender as it is performed in relation to other social locations, such as nationality.

Gender, for me, is something else than a biological fact that divides us into two complementary categories: it is neither an innate quality, nor a dichotomous system based on rigid categories of either male or female, masculine or feminine. Following Marianne Liljeström's formulation, I understand gender "as a position or location, which is directly or indirectly

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<sup>57</sup> See e. g. Chodorow 1978; Miller 1994.

<sup>58</sup> Liljeström 2004, 67.

attached to certain values, advantages, mobility, etc., which constitute the preconditions of the positions of the identity categories.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the starting point of my analysis is not an essential gender difference in narrative style or the selection of spheres of life represented. In reading the autobiography of Minna Canth I hope to show that gender is not fixed but constantly negotiated in autobiographical writing.

Marianne Liljeström has criticized taking gender as the starting point of analysis and “generalizing and idealizing gendered expectations and conventions.”<sup>60</sup> In this kind of reading, the danger is that the researcher takes “on the basis of generalized and idealized gendered expectations and conventions” – in the case of Minna Canth this could mean concluding that she was able to surpass gender division and become a national writer. However, this would leave half of the autobiography un-interpreted. There is the danger of circular arguments, if we do not take the need for careful close reading of our materials seriously. Instead, confining ourselves as researchers to the easy findings that reproduce stereotypes traditionally attached to men’s and women’s autobiographical stories.<sup>61</sup>

Bearing in mind Liljeström’s warning, I try not to base my analysis “on a conventional understanding of the private, intimate sphere and emotionality as female and the public, work-related area and rationality as male” but to concentrate on the specific autobiographical text. I do not wish to “prove” that there are generalized differences, but to find out how performing gender contextually takes place in autobiographical writing. Thus, I am searching for the actual moments in narration which open up for multiple interpretations, intersections and variations.

Autobiography is a fruitful ground for analysing the ways in which public and private are negotiated, because as a genre, it transgresses the dichotomies between private and public, official and personal, fact and fiction.<sup>62</sup> Autobiography as a space in-between provides a meeting place for shifting identities, a place for negotiating these positions in the autobiographical act. In this sense, autobiography becomes the concrete intersection for changing identity positions. The concept of intersectionality refers to the “interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination”, thus emphasizing that gender is not the only site for power and subordination, even though it may be one of the most important ones.<sup>63</sup> Considering the uneven organising of social structures and power hierarchies through gender and nationality reveals the sophisticated character of intersectional analysis. Both gender and nationality are complex themes for research, “simultaneously ordinary, present, sublime, and absent.”<sup>64</sup> It is worth pondering whether the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 143–144.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>62</sup> Saresma 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Davis 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon, Komulainen & Lempiäinen 2002b, 312.



subject is “marked first and foremost by gender”<sup>65</sup> or by some other identity category. Moreover, how are the various and transforming subject positions hierarchically organised? Gender is, of course, only one of a vast list of changing locations, others being those such as class, nationality, religion, sexuality and bodily ability. In feminist studies, gender has been seen as one of the most important hierarchical categories that organise our everyday life. By contrast, sociologists have concentrated on class status, post-colonial critics in ethnicity, and so forth. However, as more and more scholars have emphasised, it is not any separate identity category but the intersections of these more or less negotiable locations that are of most interest.

I try to unwind the intersections of gender and nationality in a specific context, in an autobiographical text written at the dawn of the Finnish nation, when gender equality was only a vague idea, and nationality was forcefully produced in various narratives which were to construct the canon. In my reading, I wish to reach the processes of performing and constructing gender and nationality. My method of reading can be called “reading differences” or even “twisting” the text in order to analyse the articulations of gender<sup>66</sup>, concentrating on the “gaps and slips to the ideal Woman, and look in the texts for incoherencies that break the logic of the masculine norm of the representations and phenomena that question polarized notions of gender.”<sup>67</sup>

### 3 Alternative plots

The distinction of private and public spheres has been a prevalent feature of Western political thought, which thus

has served to confine women, and typically Western female spheres of activity like housework, reproduction, and nurturance, and the care of the young, sick, and elderly, to the “private” domain and to keep them off the public agenda in the liberal state,

as Marianne Liljeström puts it.<sup>68</sup> The same gendered distinction influences academic readings of autobiographies. I will try to read Minna Canth’s autobiography from another, more flexible perspective. First, for the sake of example, I present two alternative readings based on the autobiography. Roughly put, the former is a public story of a national heroine, and the latter is a private story of a mother and a breadwinner. Neither is more “right” or “wrong” than the other – and there are of course many other possibilities in which to organise the autobiography than just these two.

In constructing summation of Minna Canth’s autobiography from these two perspectives, I try to preserve the tone of her writing by using plenty of

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<sup>65</sup> Liljeström 2004, 80.

<sup>66</sup> Rojola 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Liljeström 2004, 83.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, citing Seyla Benhabin 1998, 85.

quotes from the original text. I try not to interpret the events or the emotions described, but follow the narration in the original text as strictly as possible. Reading is always interpreting and attaching meanings to the text. My reading is done from the perspective of a feminist autobiography researcher, from a Finnish woman with an academic career, wife and mother, and this position influences my reading.

The story of the famous writer goes as follows:

Minna was an exceptional child, whom her father thought to be “extremely talented,” with a “peculiar emotional and fantasy life.” Her moods shifted constantly between “utter melancholy” and “dedicating herself totally to dance and amusement.” She found her vocation in the seminar for teachers, and was willing to sacrifice her whole life for education. She, however, soon got married, and it took some time before she continued contributing to public spirit. When writing passionate pamphlets, “it felt like she started living again” and was overwhelmed with her need to reform. While writing her first play, her husband died. Widowed, Minna was afraid that she was unable to write again. However, her play was published and rewarded a prize, which encouraged Minna to continue writing, which she did, despite economic problems. Studying the leading social and philosophical theorists of the time, she “freed herself from her earlier dogma and prejudices” and was inspired with ideas of reform. However, her work was received with severe critique, and the accusations of immorality threw her into depression. She “started feeling bitterness toward her country” so immense that she planned moving abroad. However, “the mission was still strong,” and she “wanted to fight to the last on behalf of the oppressed and those who had been treated wrong.” After the bashing critique and the death of three of her loved ones, Minna entered a new level in her life, and “got a clearer conception of life,” as she rose above hitting and blows, and decided to give up fighting. Instead of acting in the vanguard, she decided to become a bystander. However, national circumstances “threatened to darken our people’s future.” As the gloomy national situation “made the remains of bitterness disappear,” she did not want to leave the country but to work for it, instead. The fruit of this project was the play *Papin perhe*, highly appreciated and widely acted out. At the age of 47, Minna stated that she was not very satisfied with anything she had yet written, but added self-confidently that she hoped to be able to create something better, as there were many years to go before she reached 60 – the age at which the writers should have been killed, as the saying had it.

Based on the very same autobiography, the alternative narrative emphasises the personal experiences and relations of Minna:

The daughter of a loving father, Minna was admired and guaranteed an education that included girls’ school studies for three years, uncommon for girls at that era. Her mother, however, was not happy about the daughter who was eager to read, but whose talent in the household was nothing to be praised about. As a child, Minna contemplated God and religion, but later, she became interested in having fun, too. She also fell in love unhappily, and was afraid that it was impossible for her “to marry, as she was very frivolous by nature.” However, she got engaged to Johan Ferdinand Canth, and interrupted her studies because of marriage – and had enormous qualms ever since for abandoning her calling in education and giving in to be a housemaker. She could never forget the words of the seminar supervisor, who told her to choose to become a teacher instead of marrying in order to be happy. Minna “gave up all her ideal desires” to “do needlework, to cook and to organize home and family, into which her nature was very unwilling to bend,” and though it was very hard, she stopped reading anything but newspapers and “tried to stifle her longing”, as she “realized unquestionably that she was to be subject to her husband”. During the first years of marriage Minna tried to behave as an obedient wife, but as years ran by, she ventured to disagree. After keeping her mouth shut and “withering eight years in the lack of intellectual nourishment,” Minna started subscribing to her

husband's newspaper, and "it felt like she was born again." Besides her journalistic ambitions and eagerness to write, she also wrote fiction. During writing her first play, her husband suddenly died. She felt left totally alone with her seven children; she had no one to turn to, her father being dead, and mother not wealthy. Thus, Minna "finished the play and sent it to the theatre thinking that she was now forced to leave writing for ever." At this very dark moment as a new widow, after giving birth to their youngest, her "strength weakened exceedingly. The battle of life became too heavy, and she nearly collapsed. Insanity approached in a sinister way." Minna was depressed and was almost forced by an inner compulsion to kill her newborn. However, "the old being in me kept fighting with all its strength, and eventually won." Minna recovered slowly, started to work as a shopkeeper, and won prizes with her plays. She was very creative, but was badly hurt because of the harsh critique directed at her both as an indecent writer and an allegedly immoral mother. At times, in her creative period, she felt "powerful zest for life, courage, and strength," but intertwined with it was "pathological stimulation of the nervous system" that, with "excessive tension for the brain, several attacks against her, and grieving for losing friends because of the public opinion about her as immoral" drove Minna into depression again. Feeling "crippled in her brain," she decided to "retire on her laurels - a great advantage for both her home and her nerves". She did not stop writing, but had found a new freer, clearer vision of life after "losing to death her two best friends and her gently beloved adult daughter," and was now above fighting. Minna concluded her autobiography by pondering the hereditary features of her persona, reasoning that the "characters of her soul come from both parents - the emotional life from her mother, the rational life from her father."

Of course, the two narratives above are only examples of how the story of Minna Canth could be read. Additionally, the narratives are not separate but intertwined, distinguishable only analytically. By constructing these two narratives, my point was to demonstrate that instead of taking as the starting point for analysis a reading that is fixed to certain theoretical or ontological presuppositions about gender, the ontological division between public and private, or the subject, it might be more interesting to focus on the flexibility of reading. In this kind of reading, the performativity of reading as well as writing autobiography becomes visible.

As readers of autobiographical and other narratives, we can never be absolutely free from ontological or theoretical related presuppositions. However, it is of major importance to acknowledge these presuppositions for the sake of reliable research. The researcher with the conception of, e. g. gender as an essential biological binary fact will probably read out extrapolations of the studied narrative quite differently to those by the researcher conceptualizing gender as a process and a historical social location which is always attached to power relations. Presuppositions affect the reading: a study based on an essentialist view of the studied phenomenon - such as the idea of a "masculine" style and structuring of the autobiography through facts, concentrating on the public life, built according to chronological order, as opposed to a "feminine" style of rambling, that proceeds based on inner associations instead of rational logics, concentrating on an emotional level and relationships with others - can highlight only some aspects of the studied material, inevitably understating the others. Thus, it cannot yield any intricate interpretation of the studied phenomenon.

What struck me when narrating the autobiography according to two plot lines, roughly divided as the "public story of the writer" and the private story

of the wife and mother, was that the constructed stories seemed to be stunningly dissimilar in style and tone. It was very tempting to interpret the former, “the public story”, as a representation of a masculine way of writing: the subject is presented as autonomous and independent, and the conflicts of the story happen on the level of public and even national events, theatre enactments, critiques. In the latter, the subject would be presented as more “feminine” in its relationality and its way of emphasizing emotions. Of course, when constructing these plot summaries, I have more or less consciously used the gendered way of representing the subject. Even so, it is very tempting to unquestionably look at gender as dual mode in autobiographical writing – although it might be more challenging and more rewarding to look for other ways to read autobiographies. That is, instead of reading the autobiography as either – or what can be interpreted as both. This moving interpretation does not fix the meanings but highlights the ongoing negotiations of autobiographical narration, thus also emphasizing the performativity of both narrating and reading, and autobiography as a process, not a fixed product.

#### 4 Moving positions

Instead of reducing the multifaceted narration of autobiography into simple story lines, as I did above for the sake of example, it might be worth analysing the various subject positions of the narrator. Above, it is possible to discern numerous subject positions, such as the daughter, frivolous juvenile, student, wife, mother and widow, homemaker and breadwinner. Thus, she may be read as a heroine of private everyday life, prodigy, teacher, educator, missionary, journalist, intellectual, opinion leader, pamphletist-reformer, creative artist and national author.

Moreover, the subject positions intersect in ways that make their instability visible. For example, Minna’s public career in education is interrupted because of a change of her marital status. Later on, the subject positions of mother and intellectual collide, and it is hard to negotiate her status as both a public figure commenting on sensitive issues such as religion, social problems, and feminism, in addition to being a competent parent as a single mother, capable of raising her offspring in a morally correct manner. But the positions can also support each other, such as when taking part in public intellectual life, writing pamphlets and being active in contemporary ideological discussions provides the homemaker and mother of small children with longed-for adult contact. As well as additionally, that writing offered an escape from domestic duties.<sup>69</sup>

A nuanced analysis of autobiographies is not constrained to rigid and unarticulated presuppositions. However, various themes and contents need to be taken into account. Instead of subscribing to the idea that there are two

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<sup>69</sup> Rytkönen 2000, 177.

possible narratives in Minna Canth's autobiography, namely the "public" narrative of the famous national author, and the "private" narrative of the widow and mother, that has sometimes been suggested in feminist thinking as well<sup>70</sup>, the reader of Minna Canth's autobiography should instead ask, how the transforming and many-layered subject of her autobiography works.

In every autobiographical text, the subject consists of various layers, such as the narrating and the narrated 'I'.<sup>71</sup> The subject of Minna's autobiography can very well be *both* a unique and creative genius, *and* a family mother, mentally instable *and* capable of nurturing at the same time. It is also worth noting that the subject is constructed as both a distinguished individual, the opinion leader of the nation and a prize-winning author, a woman sharing the experiences of being a housewife and mother, as well as a misunderstood writer – all this in a short autobiography. As I hope to have shown above, the locations in Minna's narrative are not stable or fixed. Instead, they are constantly shifting, as performed in the autobiographical act.

In her time, it was exceptional for a woman to partake in intellectual and artistic debates. The subject of Minna's autobiography actively takes part in nation-building, and yet, at the same time, is constructed as a vulnerable, mentally unstable mother, a widow fighting poverty, and a grieving friend. The subject writes herself inside both public and private spheres. She is both "a speaking agent within a world of male institutions, including writing"<sup>72</sup> and a housewife, insecure of her capabilities as homemaker, and sometimes overwhelmed with her requirements and responsibilities as wife and mother.

In academic tradition we are accustomed to reading autobiographies as either masculine or feminine. This conventional reading should not, however, block other interpretations. Reading autobiographies as performative enables for the analysis of gender as produced in autobiographical writing. The notion of gender was not used in Minna Canth's time. However, autobiographical narration of that time was not free of gendered presuppositions. Whether reading autobiographies of today or those written more than a century ago, there is no point in labeling the narrative either autonomous or relational, either feminine or masculine, either public or private. Acknowledging this might mean "reading against the grain" instead of restricting reading into fixed categories.

Reading the century-old autobiography is also interesting in the context of Finnish equality discourse. When reading Minna's autobiography, I empathize with her will to step into so many shoes. As we know from history writing, it seems that Minna Canth was able to merge the roles of mother and provider for the family, educator, reformist, nationally influential person and successful merchant. This public portrait may have lost shades and some of its accuracy in decades of repeated narration. The polished image of Minna Canth as our

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<sup>70</sup> E. g. Carolyn Heilbrun has made an "observation about the radical difference between the private and public personas of women writers". Hooogenboom 2000, 29 citing Heilbrun 1989.

<sup>71</sup> See Smith & Watson 2001; Liljeström 2004, 69; Saresma 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Liljeström, Rosenholm & Savikova 2000, 13.

national heroine, author and suffragette serves as the ideal of the Strong Finnish Woman, the omnipotent image that leaves no place for weakness or insecurity. The ideal is purified of any contradictory subject positions, and represents Minna Canth as a winner, an extraordinary woman, both making the ideal unattainable and placing considerable strain on every woman. Reading Minna's autobiography, on the contrary, brings out the contradictions of the subject positions, the fractures and inconsistencies that make the subject more human and more easily accessible – thus, deconstructing the narrative of the Strong Finnish Woman, giving us perhaps a more realistic model of negotiating equality.

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