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What's in a Child's Voice?

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In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens expounds at some length on the war against Fancy waged by educators. In the spirit of the Industrial Revolution, children were to be brought up to realism and led away from the childish realms of fancy. Sissy Jupe is an unfortunate victim of this war against "the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies" (35) glimpsed in the books she once read to her father—and to her dog. They shaped her imagination and so her voice, an enchanted yet a disruptive voice. For Dickens, it was also the voice of nature, a useful weapon in the struggle against the champions of Reason and Productivity.

Sissy Jupe is as good a starting point as any to ask just what is in a child's voice in literature. How is it different from an adult voice? What is it that makes it sound childish? What makes it so particular, and to what end does the writer use it? Do first-person and third-person narrators spark the same emotions in the reader when both are children? Are the possibilities for using a child's voice in narrative limited? Or is there a danger of forfeiting verisimilitude (when the vocabulary or syntax is too sophisticated for a child) or depth of emotion (when the vocabulary and syntax are too simple)?

The etymology of the word "infant" ("without voice," "he who does not speak") posits the child narrator almost as an oxymoron, and points to the difficulty of giving voice to a character who is both chronologically and intellectually removed from the writer. Moreover, until recently the silence of the child was the product of rules for good behaviour such as "Speak only when you are spoken to" or "children should be seen and not heard." Giving a voice to a fictional child thus undermines generations of educators—and not only in Dickens. Indeed children's voices are a relatively recent phenomenon in literature. In fact in both society and literature the child's very existence was barely recognised until writers such as Mark Twain or Charles Dickens drew them out of their silent obscurity. Here, again, however, we are faced with a paradox. The writer who uses a child's voice is never himself a child, even when his intended reader is. The writer must make an effort to give voice to the child he or she once was. But can he really ever rediscover the child he or she was in order to write as one, or is he forever condemned to impersonating the child he wishes he had been? Is not the child's voice in narrative somehow a manifestation of the writer's hopeless search for the lost paradise of childhood?

The child narrator often strikes a jarring note in an adult world and his or her voice and gaze question the status quo. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Ralph in *Lord of the Flies*, Oliver Twist

or Jenny Wren, Alex in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, to name but a few, all contain something that goes against the grain of the general workings of the adult world. They question the way things are done. And the way things are said. They question the way things are thought about. They question the whole adult view of reality, which leads to another question: to whom is the child's voice addressed? To other children that the writer supposes will identify with the child whose voice he or she has created? Or perhaps to obdurate adults whose ways of thinking it unsettles? Is the child's voice, in other words, simply a narrative voice amongst others, or does it serve a didactic function? Is it meant to serve as an injunction to question the adult world before entering it? Is it, perhaps, the voice of a teacher in disguise? Finally, when considering the voice of the child, should we distinguish between literature aimed at adults and literature for young readers? Or are they one and the same, teaching rather than telling, no matter who the reader is?

Historically, books *for* children (both traditional fairy and folk tales and more recent writing) have been largely moral and didactic, aiming at giving their readers—or listeners, since they are often read to children by adults—essential guidelines to good behaviour, the dos and don'ts of any particular culture. Most theorists agree that children's literature—that is stories written by contemporary authors for children in which the main characters are children—emerged in mid-eighteenth century England under the influence of Locke's and Rousseau's theories on education and the modern concepts of childhood.[1] The first century of books for children produced essentially moral and didactic works in which the child's voice as such was still largely unheard. Two literary landmarks, both English, signal the accession of what might be called a realistic child's voice or at least a questioning voice tinged with innocence. They are *Tom Brown's School Days* by Thomas Hughes (1857) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Yet, although Tom Brown *is* given a voice in dialogue, it is an unnamed first-person omniscient narrator who tells us rather more than the title suggests—not all of it even concerned with Tom. Lewis Carroll's masterpiece is thus regarded by most historians of children's literature as the first novel to centre specifically on a child hero with a voice and narrative perspective, despite the third person narration.

Another novel by Charles Dickens, published at the same time as Carroll's *Alice*, also explores the possibilities of the child's voice in narrative. It uses the child's voice in a completely different manner from that of Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times*. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) features a strange character who belongs to the world of adults and yet has the voice of a child, a voice that is critical of adult behaviour. Though she earns money for both herself and her father, Jenny Wren is a child. She is crippled, although at the end of the novel she hardly needs a stick at all, and she is from the first rather ambiguously introduced by the narrative

[1] See Peter Hunt, Anita Silvey, and Seth Lerer, amongst others.

voice as “a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something” (275). In the dialogue that immediately follows this description she is again referred to as a child, but her own description of herself would be better suited to an old woman: “‘I can’t get up’ said the child, ‘because my back’s bad, and my legs are queer. But I’m the person of the house’” (275). Even more striking is the manner in which Jenny refers to the adults around her. Her clients are “dolls” and her own father a “child”: “‘Well, it’s Saturday night,’ she returned, ‘and my child’s coming home. And my child is a troublesome bad child, and costs me a world of scolding. I would rather you didn’t see my child’” (278). Indeed, when her father staggers home, drunk, she makes him turn out his pockets in order to salvage what remains of his pay. In this reversal of roles and of voices, Dickens seems to depict a world in which there is no longer any room for the innocence of childhood, a world in which the child’s voice is, on the contrary, knowing and worldly, to compensate for the lack of moral integrity in adults. As the narrator writes concerning Jenny: “Poor dolls’ dressmaker! How often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up; how often so misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance. Poor, poor, little dolls’ dressmaker!” (278).

Here the child’s voice represents a sort of warped innocence, an innocence that has never been allowed to emerge, a false adulthood that is morally superior to that of the real adults. More generally, Dickens’s children have dissonant voices, and yet they act (and speak) the way ideal adults would in a world where many adults are singularly lacking in morality. They are almost more mature than the adults around them, marked with a “natural” sense of good and evil, and Dickens (particularly with the dolls’ dressmaker, but also in the short story “A Holiday Romance”), tends towards the idea that children are born just and knowing and are subsequently corrupted by education and society, rather than improved by it. The child’s voice is just, intelligent and well-meaning—a far cry from the adult’s corrupt and self-centred self-interest—and so it is a force of disruption.

It is hardly surprising then that this type of child narrator has grown to be the mainspring of fantasy and heroic fantasy, a genre that follows the narrative scheme of the *Bildungsroman* but with a fairy tale component. The child-like hobbit people in *The Lord of the Rings* are the only ones capable of withstanding the corruption of the ring of power, and thus manage to preserve the world of (adult) men from the evil arch-sorcerer Sauron. And in the *Harry Potter* series, J. K. Rowling blends the child’s voice and gaze in both *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* to create a single character capable of saving two worlds at the same time. Even George R. R. Martin gives precedence to the child’s voice as herald of moral rectitude through Ned Stark’s children in his epic saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Need we underline the fact that these child heroes do not appeal only to children? The success of the *Harry Potter* series owes as much if not more to adult readers than to children. Adults the world over have identified with the young Harry's ascent to power and the difficult choices he made along the way. The series is thus a fascinating object through which to examine the reception of the child's voice and gaze. As with *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, it would seem that nostalgia has played a part in its success. But there is more to it. British readers may enjoy reminiscing about their own school experiences through the prism of Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and a number of European and North American schools perhaps resemble Hogwart's enough to enable some kind of identification, but the worldwide success of the books seems to point to a form of identification that goes beyond the individual reality of childhood and school experience, that reaches towards the mythical or ideal. Recent publications influenced by the series include philosophical guides among which *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, and *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, a collection of feminist essays entitled *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts*, and even a psychological analysis of *The Boy Who Lived*.

Clearly the phenomenon exceeds parental interest in their children's reading. Perhaps it is merely a manifestation of Freud's ego-ideal or ideal ego. In his 1914 essay on narcissism, Freud introduced the idea of a substitute in adult life for the lost narcissism of childhood. In other words, for Freud, the child's self-love is transferred in adulthood to the ego-ideal. For Jacques Lacan, since "the subject has to constitute himself in his imaginary reality" (144), the ideal ego is "that point at which [the subject] desires to gratify himself in himself" (257). If we follow this logic, it would indeed seem that the child hero is a strong basis for identification because he appeals to the ideal ego of the adult reader, to that part of his narcissism that can only be gratified in the imagination. However, as Harold Bloom rightly pointed out in *Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov,* in order to be fulfilling and not simply a return to "intense, excessive, and sometimes fatal devotion to the ego-ideal" (120-121) the subject (in this case the reader) must "give up his corrupt ego-ideal and affirm the innocence of humility" (133).

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Classical humanist tradition has marked the child as an incomplete and therefore deficient sub-adult, whose incoherent babble and burble need to be disciplined into a coherent *logos*—a minor, muted being. In "The End of the Party," a short-story published in 1929, Graham Greene violently denounced such relegation of the voices of children, due to the inability of adults to listen to their specific language: nine-year-old Francis Morton is tragically silenced by the absent-minded refusal of adults to heed his fears—fear of going to a birthday-party,

fear of the dark, fear of being mocked—which are dismissed as "childish" (an obvious synonym here for "stupid") by the imperative "cold confidence of a grown-up's retort, 'Don't be silly. You must go'" (Greene 39). Greene marks in his short-story the typical embedding of the voices of children within an overhanging third-person narration, that frames and disciplines the words of the child: free indirect speech is here a way to insist that words cannot be spoken out, that there is no free direct speech allowed to children. The only solution for Francis is to fantasize what he might have said if he could speak, while remaining morbidly aphasic and obedient. The imperative mode used by the mother cannot be answered, save potentially: "He would answer: 'You can say I am ill. I won't go. I am afraid of the dark.' [...] He could almost hear himself saying those final words" (Greene 39). When children do dare to speak and when speaking is so dangerous that straws need to be drawn to designate the speaker-loser, the retort is final: Oliver Twist's famous iconic request "Please Sir, I want some more" has him immediately kicked out of the workhouse.

But Dickens brought about a major change. With David Copperfield in 1850, Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* in 1852 and Pip in *Great Expectations* in 1860, he crucially gave a direct voice to these children: they were no longer a picturesque, endearing topic, patronisingly celebrated for their proverbial naivety and freshness of view, dealt with and spoken about—instead they became the narrators of their own stories. With these three ground-breaking first-person narrations (*Bleak House* is in fact built as an alternation between the authoritative normative chapters written by on omniscient narrator, and the tentative ones told by Esther herself, as a verbal battle that eventually sees the dismissal of the omniscient narrator and the victory of Esther who stands the narrative ground in the final chapter), Dickens paved the way for what came to be described as the first "golden age" of British literature for children, and then between 1850 and 1910 the most memorable figures of childhood heroes were created: Maggie Tulliver by George Eliot in 1860, Alice by Lewis Carroll in 1865, Jim Hawkins by Stevenson in 1883, Little Lord Fauntleroy by Frances Burnett in 1885, Mowgli and Kim by Kipling in 1894 and 1900, Peter Pan by J. M. Barrie in 1904. Allowed where they did not belong, these children all took up an improbable position of control, and they confronted readers with a twofold process of defamiliarisation indeed: a new gaze at the world, but also, and decisively, a new language, a dissident *infant tongue* to challenge the normative *mother tongue*. Dickens makes it very clear as early as the famous first sentence of *Great Expectations*. The novel is meant as a tale of literary experimentation, in which the child's illiteracy is seen as a source of creative power, a way to short-circuit the mother tongue, to invent what Gilles Deleuze calls in *Critique et clinique* "a minor use of the major tongue" ("un usage mineur de la langue majeure," Deleuze 15): "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my *infant tongue* could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called

Pip" (*Great Expectations* 9). The babble, "Pip" for "Philip Pirrip," is performative and the mistake is creative: self-named and self-disencumbered right from sentence one from the rigid structures of language, Pip irrupts as a solution of continuity in literature.

What is remarkable is the twofold nature of all these texts: they are on the one hand highly enjoyable adventure stories, classics for children, and on the other reflexive tales of literary experimentation. All these children seem to be on the same very serious literary mission, their object being to displace dominant Realism, to look for a literary alternative. The official mother tongue is given quite a rough ride when entrusted to these mini-narrators, as in Kim's introductory words: the first sentence of the novel presents him as a rebel ("he sat, in defiance of municipal orders," Kipling 1) and a couple of lines down the rebellion is specifically located in the field of language: "he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song" (Kipling 1). As Deleuze has it, Kim "traces in the tongue a sort of foreign tongue that is not another tongue, but a process of becoming-other of the tongue, a minoration of that major tongue" ("[…] trace dans la langue une sorte de langue étrangère, qui n'est pas une autre langue, mais un devenir-autre de la langue, une minoration de cette langue majeure," Deleuze 15).

In the following articles, many specific examples of what children do to literature are given, and the detailed characteristics of that minor tongue gradually emerge. But in this introduction, we would like to insist briefly on the collective modern contribution of the prototypical minor narrators at the end of the Victorian period, on their being a highly self-conscious force of literary disruption, favouring opacity over transparency, levelling the viewpoint, and deconstructing mimesis.

It is probably not irrelevant that they should nearly all be orphans, "posthumous children" as David Copperfield unsentimentally defines himself on the second page of his narrative: "I was a posthumous child. My father's eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it" (*David Copperfield* 50); Kim's mother and father die in the first paragraph; Jim Hawkins' father unceremoniously dies in the first chapter ("My poor father died quite suddenly that evening" (Stevenson 15); the first scene of *Great Expectations* takes place in the churchyard where Pip's mother and father are buried; Peter Pan is the leader of all the lost children. Remarkably enough, these orphans often inherit some fragment of language from their dead parents, scraps that are unintelligible mainly because they cannot read—journals they need to interpret, opaque epitaphs, obscure maps, incomprehensible clearance certificates: Kim's verbal inheritance is literally fastened around his neck; it is his only burden ("So it came about after his death that the woman sewed parchment, paper, and birth-certificate into a leather amulet-case which she strung round Kim's neck," Kipling 2) as his father's "estate at death consisted of three papers. […] On no account was Kim to part

with them, for they belonged to a great piece of magic" (Kipling 2). Among the papers are Kim's birth certificate and his father's "clearance certificate"—between inverted commas and so indecipherable for the child. Kim has no debts, in other words, except for the lesson that language is not an authoritative mimetic reference but merely opaque material to be freely manipulated. Thus, language is a bequest, but with no liabilities attached. The father's paper guarantees that the son is clear of debt.

The same goes for Pip in the churchyard; all that remains of his mother and father is the disorienting inscription on their tombstone:

> As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (*Great Expectations* 9)

As interpretation replaces reading, language becomes a highly elastic way not to copy reality, but to build a fantasized soothing alternative: "my construction even of their simple meaning was not very correct, for I read 'wife of the Above' as a complimentary reference to my father's exaltation to a better world; and if any one of my deceased relations had been referred to as 'Below,' I have no doubt I should have formed the worst opinions of that member of the family" (*Great Expectations* 38). Reality yields to the power of fictive reconstruction, and language is thus an invitation to travel, a line of escape, as Pip notices: "the writing was rather hilly" (*Great Expectations* 39).

What is common to all these children is that language is certainly not the transparent neutral "glass-house" Zola advocated in *Les Romanciers naturalistes*, directly leading to a single stable authoritative meaning. Trusted to these children, language resists interpretation, and finding meaning is always a performance, a personal and often arbitrary achievement as Pip's example proves: "Much of my unassisted self, [...] I struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bush; getting considerably worried and scratched by every letter" (*Great Expectations* 39). Similarly Jim Hawkins becomes a stranger in his own language when he is confronted with Captain Flint's disorienting logbook. He confesses to his own interpretative failure, while Dr. Livesey, the impeccably learned lawyer, immediately reduces the opaque mass to one linear authoritative explanation. To Jim on the contrary, language is fragmented and discontinuous, the "scraps of writing," "the curious series of entries," "the crosses" and "the snatches, mostly single words and unintelligible" (Stevenson 32) open endless lines of interpretative escape; they conjure up a potential world more than they copy reality.

Replacing mimesis with fancy is probably the most explicit and noticeable literary move these literary rebels make. Pip typically gives up on the indicative mode and mimetic preterit to make an extensive use of the fictive present and escape grimy material reality: "It was a rimy morning, and very damp. I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window, *as if* some goblin had been crying there all night, and using the window for a pocket-handkerchief" (*Great Expectations* 19, emphasis mine) or "Something clicked in his throat, *as if* he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike" (*Great Expectations* 21, emphasis mine). Both quotes inscribe the literary alternative, the switch from the major mode to the minor mode triggered by the subordinate clause in "as if": vertical reliable testimony in the principle clause yields to horizontal fanciful vision in the subordinate—the omniscient narrator as eye-witness gives way to the visionary, and quite soon, the "as if" is simply erased, and fiction intrudes unannounced upon reality, as this example of a hot roll turned into a mellow bed proves: "Mr Trabb had sliced his hot roll into three feather beds, and was slipping butter in between the blankets, and covering it up" (*Great Expectations* 117). Exactly the same thing happens with Jim Hawkins when confronted to Long John Silver:

> How that personage haunted my dreams, I need scarcely tell you. On stormy nights, when the wind shook the four corners of the house and the surf roared along the cove and up the cliffs, I would see him in a thousand forms, and with a thousand diabolical expressions. Now the leg would be cut off at the knee, now at the hip; now he was a monstrous kind of a creature who had never had but the one leg, and that in the middle of his body. To see him leap and run and pursue me over hedge and ditch was the worst of nightmares. (Stevenson 3)

Here, Jim modalises his child vision with "would," a hybrid nearly fantastic form in between the indicative frequentative past and a hallucinated potential mode: the vision actually becomes reality, as "would" becomes "was." The infinitive clause "to see him and run" further inscribes the fantastic hesitation: it designates both a possibility and a reality, a specific reality that turns into an undetermined hallucination.

These two examples illustrate Deleuze's analysis in "Ce que les enfants disent" in which he insists that children crucially see the world as "indefinite" ("indéterminé"), because for children characters and things are constantly in the process of becoming something else (Deleuze 86). There is no limit indeed to Pip's or Jim's imaginations: Long John Silver, no matter how specific, becomes wider; he expands in the child's imagination; *the* one-legged man becomes *a* monstrous kind of *a* creature, with a leg in the middle of his body, and "a face as big as a ham" (Stevenson 43). To Deleuze this is the central specificity of children's language, and it highlights the literary interest of the indefinite: "There is nothing missing in the indefinite, and certainly not determination. It is the determination of becoming, it is its

own power" ("L'indéfini ne manque de rien et surtout pas de détermination. Il est la détermination du devenir, sa puissance propre" Deleuze 86).

So at the end of the Victorian era, hordes of children, unleashed by Dickens, were beginning to invade the narrative ground, and were obviously there to stay as the extremely dense and dynamic future of children's literature proves. Their arrival was clearly a literary event. The voice of the child was no longer summoned as a mere foil by a disciplinary omniscient narrator, as a comic and endearing device to be kept under control; it was not mimicked in its easy winning idiosyncrasies; it was not used by the dominant *doxa* to reinforce its own power. The voice of the child must be regarded as a deliberate textual phenomenon, an experiment in writing, meant to challenge and modernise canonical forms of representation. Henry James thought as much when he unexpectedly praised the modernity of Stevenson's tales of childhood:

> That delightful little book of rhymes, the "Child's Garden," commemorates, from beginning to end, the picturing, personifying, dramatizing faculty of infancy, the view of life from the level of the nursery-fender. The volume is a wonder, for the extraordinary vividness with which it reproduces early impressions; a child might have written it if a child could see childhood from the outside, for it would seem that only a child is really near enough to the nursery-floor. And what is peculiar to Mr. Stevenson is that it is his own childhood he appears to delight in, and not the personal presence of little darlings. Oddly enough, there is no strong implication that he is fond of babies; he doesn't speak as a parent, or an uncle, or an educator—he speaks as a contemporary absorbed in his own game. (James 295)

Stevenson does not mimic the child, he becomes child: abolishing apical vision and seeing life horizontally, "from the level of a nursery-fender," obviously seemed to James the most promising move in the contemporary game of literature.

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In the field of American studies, the figure of the child has not been unduly neglected. Research programs on children's literature have sprouted up across the U.S. in the past thirty years, while scholarship on the subject has drawn attention to the ubiquitous presence of the child in American literature. More than a passing fad, childhood studies still regularly provide forums for transdisciplinary discussion all over the country. Can the phenomenon be traced back to Emerson's glorification of the "poor child," "unbound, unrhymed" addressed by the speaker in "Woodnotes," a child graced with nature's "formidable innocence," who "[shall] outsee seers, and outwit sages"? Did Jeffersonian ideals of simplicity in the early years of the nation play a role in its development? Or, more generally, does the American fascination with innocence—and more precisely the loss of innocence—account for it?

Political and religious factors almost certainly account, at least in part, for the child's rise to prominence in American thought. The paternalistic rhetoric that suffuses the writings of the Revolutionary period amply attests to the typically colonialist reduction of Americans to the status of unruly children to be chastised by the mother country. Once these children had come of age, however, that is, once independence had been recognized by Great Britain, one might have expected the new United States to position itself as a fully-fledged "adult nation." That is not exactly what happened, however. Quite unexpectedly, the figure of the child found itself at the heart of a patriotic discourse advocating the virtues of simplicity and frugal innocence.

It is perhaps necessary to go back in time, back to the first Puritan settlements, to understand why the child has been granted a special place in the American cultural imagination. In Europe, up to the Renaissance at least, the child was emphatically not a moral reference. While St. Augustine regarded the child as representative of fallen humanity (Pattison x) and maintained that "the innocence of childhood is more a matter of weakness of the limbs than of purity of the heart" (Fiedler 473), Goodenough, Heberle and Sokoloff argue that Dante's *Divine Comedy* "only has places for fully developed human souls," which accounts for "the *infanti* [being] left in Limbo" (5), unable to gain access either to Purgatory, Hell or Paradise. If virtue is predicated on maturity and if goodness is a matter of developing consciousness, not impulse, how could the child ever hope to become a "moral touchstone" (Fiedler 473)? The Puritan doctrine of predestination initiated a powerful shift in this respect. By positing that grace and redemption are granted to an individual from the day he/she is born, the Puritans paved the way for a re-centering of the place of the child in America's colonial discourse. As the initial belief in original sin was giving way to a new belief in original innocence (Fiedler 474), the child gained respectability in the political, religious, and artistic thought of the time.

As underlined by Levander and Singley, "[t]he child is a compelling interpretive site precisely because it is so open and so vulnerable to competing, even opposing, claims. And in a U.S. context, the child functions as an empty or loaded cipher, a conscious or unconscious presence, or a provocative or inert force, with greater intensity and duration than it has in other cultural contexts" (5). The same colonizing logic that had placed the thirteen original colonies in the position of children under British rule was later displaced as the new U.S. resorted to images of children to justify the conversion of the natives and the practice of slavery. The fundamental instability of the child as an "empty cipher" ready to be filled with the most contradictory meanings can hardly be denied in these early stages of the young American nation.

Anna Mae Duane has explored the political dimension intrinsic to the figure of the suffering child that was recurrently used throughout the nineteenth century, and not only in the U.S., by colonizers and colonized alike. As she evokes the much-discussed, highly sentimental scene of little Eva's death (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), she suggests that "[s]lavery breaks Eva's heart and Tom's body because neither of them has the power to alter slavery's grasp. Yet it is their very defenselessness, their childlike inability to shape their own circumstances, that invests them with the emotional power to change the hearts and minds of those who witness their demise" (2-3). This is one of the fundamental paradoxes underlying the literary function of the child: how to use a figure reputed for its inarticulateness and powerlessness as a means of expression and empowerment.

Hawthorne's most famous fictional child, little Pearl, has often been regarded as "one of the most enigmatic child figures in American literature" (Qin 41). Although little space is allotted to her actual speech and conversations with her mother, she stands out as a guiding thread throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. Right from the first scaffold scene, when she is only an infant in the arms of her mother who is being exposed to public contempt, she holds up "[her] little arms, with a half-pleased, half-plaintive murmur," as the Reverend Dimmesdale, who cannot bring himself to confess his sin before the whole community, pleads with Hester to reveal the name of the child's father. We should be wary, however, of reducing Pearl to a mere moral touchstone or catalyst of truth. The forest scene in which she later meets the Reverend allows Hawthorne to convey the child's humanity and flesh out her preternatural character, first by focusing on her solitary play by the seaside, and eventually by emphasizing her dual nature. Pearl is both spirit and matter, earth and sky, innocence and evil (as shown by the cruelty of her games when she starts throwing stones at the birds). She belongs to a border zone of indistinct identities and is surely the best representation of the abject in *The Scarlet Letter*.[2] As such, she is clearly a threat for the well-defined borders of the Puritan world as she exists in a middle ground that challenges the fundamental belief that one is either lost or redeemed from the start. Like all abject beings she tries to find her place in the world, and her mother's introductory question ("where are you?", 154) summarizes what is at stake for her, i.e., locating herself in space, finding a place somewhere between the Puritan world from which she is excluded and the wilderness that borders her cottage.

Children are similarly relegated to the margins of the text in Kate Chopin's feminist novel *The Awakening*. As if to reinforce women's status as "minors," Chopin closes the first two chapters of her novel with passing references to Edna's children that significantly reflect the young woman's own relationship to her husband ("Both children wanted to follow their

[2] On the abject, see Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*: "Au lieu de s'interroger sur son être, [l'abject] s'interroge sur sa place: '*Où* suis-je ?' plutôt que '*Qui* suis-je ?'" (15).

father [...]. He kissed them and promised to bring them back bonbons and peanuts," 45) and to her devoted admirer, Robert Lebrun ("he amused himself with the little Pontellier children, who were very fond of him," 47). Altogether, though, children are conspicuously absent from *The Awakening*—strangely enough in a novel that figures a childbirth scene as the apex of Edna's awakening to a new sense of self. Like her children, Edna remains voiceless for most of the novel as she has difficulty expressing her deepest longings and her desire to break free from her conventional life with her husband and two sons. One of the rare scenes[3] in which we are allowed to hear the voice of Edna's children is one in which they are paradoxically absent, having been sent away to their grandmother's for the summer. Far from merely expressing the charm and innocent joys of childhood, the letter they send their mother to tell her of their boyish adventures in the countryside actually crystallizes Chopin's caustic comments upon women's condition as they express their delight with the fact that their grandmother's "big white pig" (162) has just given birth to a litter of ten tiny piglets. Positioned as the scene is, just two chapters before the climactic childbirth scene which Adèle forces her friend Edna to attend, and in light of Adèle's systematic presentation as a woman in white, such details inevitably cast a most unglamorous veil over the devoted mother-women here embodied by Edna's friend.

Children repeatedly allow us to hear little voices of protest, criticism and resistance to orthodoxy emerging from the marginal textual sites to which they have been consigned. Such exploitation of the child figure has admittedly come under sharp criticism. In the 1970s, one of America's most outspoken and prolific scholars, Leslie Fiedler, published a foundational essay entitled "The Eye of Innocence," the first part of which focuses on what he calls "The Invention of the Child." With the streak of impertinence and witty eloquence that typify his critical output, Fiedler exposes the child as "a cultural invention, a product of the imagination" (471), and he goes on to lambaste the hypocrisy of bourgeois values with which artists make themselves complicit when they resort to that "safely genteel symbol of protest and impulse: the Child" (476). Real flesh-and-blood children were the first victims of the craze, he suggests, when, "[in] time, [they] were recreated by hairdressers and tailors into facsimiles of their literary representations, and were addressed as if they were really such monsters of virtue" (477). "Only Lewis Carroll," says Fiedler, "was able to rescue the pre-nubile heroine from pious insipidity" (488). He does see in Huck Finn, however, "the really Bad Boy, a projection of insolence and contempt for authority" (490), notwithstanding the fact that Huck "is also the persecuted orphan [...], a nonresisting rebel, gentle and scared and (alas!) cute" (490).

[3] Another scene focuses on the children's reaction to their mother's desire to leave the house and settle into a little house around the corner, but these reactions are related in indirect speech only, relegating the two boys to the backstage and also, maybe, reinforcing their connection with some kind of disembodied voice in Edna's own conscience.

The fourth part of Fiedler's essay contains a few valuable insights into the importance of the child's gaze. "The child," he asserts, "is [...] considered an exemplar not of the innocence of the spirit but of the eye. Implicated in aggression and sexuality, he projects nonetheless an unfallen way of perceiving the world; and his ambiguous unfallenness is used ironically to portray the implication of us all in the guilt he shares but about which he has not yet learned to lie" (494-495). Fiedler later suggests that, in literature in English at least, the child has become a fully-fledged participant in the new version of the Fall on account of his/her position as a witness "presumably watching everything from behind the tree" (500). He credits Henry James with "establish[ing] the Child as Peeping Tom" (500) in *What Maisie Knew* and setting the trend for a long string of child characters as helpless witnesses of adult evil. For a long time, however, American writers refrained from establishing too close a connection between children and firsthand experience of evil. In the U.S., adds Fiedler, it is in the act of killing that the child first enters the postlapsarian world of lost innocence. Faulkner's ten-year-old Ike McCaslin ("The Bear") stands out as a classic reference, but the Americans had to wait for Nabokov to witness the demise of the innocent child in a nightmarish world where the child "is no longer raped, strangled or seduced, but is himself (better herself!) rapist, murderer, and seducer" (510).

If we posit, along with Daniel Calin, that "the child's voice should be neither repressed nor respected; *one should set about constructing it instead*" ("La parole de l'enfant n'est ni à réprimer ni à respecter, *elle est à construire*", author's emphasis), there still remains the question of how best to construct (or re-construct) and interpret this voice. Beyond the mere (and ultimately fruitless?) question of how faithfully writers have been able to transcribe the linguistic peculiarities of a child's speech, there lie deeper concerns with political and aesthetic implications. Once we have acknowledged that such a fashioning process is nothing but a mere literary construct, an artifact, what should we make of the ideological motivations that have led so many writers to place the child's voice at the very heart of the writing process? How do writers and other artists use this minor mode to regenerate a language that has become mired in the commonplace? To what extent can we consider the child's voice and the child's gaze as instruments of resistance to the prevalent hegemonic discourse? And are critics justified in asserting that "the United States is distinctive in the ways that it has seized upon the image of the child in opposition to that which is constructed or institutionalized, and in the extent to which it has promoted the child as a force of resistance as well as innocent vulnerability" (Levander and Singley 3)? These are some of the questions that are addressed by the contributors to this issue as they explore the implications of using the child's voice or gaze in English and American literatures.

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