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Deconstructing Childhood

It is getting on toward twenty-five years since Jacqueline Rose proposed “the impossibility of children’s literature.”[1] By now, many scholars are at least conditionally at ease with not just the impossibility of children’s literature, but the fictionality of childhood itself. “Childhood,” like children’s literature, like the floating nomenclature “the child,” thrives as the product of adult presumptions and desires. To write “for” children, urged Rose, is an act of veiled narcissism: a largely invented child audience serves as a pretext for the creation of an adulthood at home with a language of innocence and wholeness. Susan Honeyman pushes this paradigm further: she sees the same dynamic of projection in writing *about* children as Rose saw in writing *for* them. Her aim is to “demonstrate the great but underestimated extent to which we impose ‘childhood’ on those we define as children according to biased standards of adult nostalgia and desire” (p. 2).

To some extent, this point has been made with much vigor by Karen Lesnik-Oberstein, Carolyn Steedman, and James Kincaid’s influential work on “child loving.”[2] Honeyman, however, contributes to the discussion by focusing mainly on American writers of the last 120 years, and by self-consciously integrating her literary criticism into the coalescing field of “childhood studies.” Her book thus aspires not only to address how writers represent children, but to critique how adults “impose” childhood on children. She hopes to “dismantle” the discourse of “ageist essentializing,” to “alter our ways of thinking” by making visible the limits “our own solipsistic power” as

adults (pp. 11, 16), and thus “decenter the unearned authority of adulthood” (p. 115). In its scope and aspirations, then, Honeyman’s work brings the activism of cultural studies to the study of childhood.

Honeyman’s language is familiar to anyone who lived through the theory wars of the 1980s and 1990s: she works explicitly within the practice of deconstruction, which leads her to place greater emphasis on representation and language than her more culturally inclined peers. Like them, she does see children as the vessels, as voids, or, to borrow Locke’s famous formulation, as blank pages, which adults fill with their most intimate and utopian desires and fears. Children, in essence, live under the burden of “childhood,” a state of being described as everything that adults are not—irrational (or “creative”), asocial (or radically free), asexual (or “innocent”). In deconstructive terms, childhood functions as a category of identity that has less to do with the experiences of actual children than it does with legitimating the authority of a certain kind of adulthood. “Adult,” in this sense, emerges as what Jacques Derrida called a “transcendent signifier.” Like “God,” or “man,” or “truth,” it seems to stand alone as self-evident, immaculate, even sacred, in its meaning. In fact, however, as Derrida and others make clear, these signifiers depend for their power on their connections to, indeed their dependency for meaning on, other, lesser valued, terms. What is God? —“not-man,” “not-evil,” “not-history.” What is man? —“not-woman,” “not-animal,” “not-God.” Once we tease out these hidden dependencies, once we deconstruct the sleights of hand that

make privileged terms seem inviolable, we go a long way toward uncovering the hidden values, the cultural investments, the ideologies, that elevate one term over any other. In the hands of cultural studies, and critics like Michel Foucault, deconstructing makes evident the “constructedness” of knowledge, and thus the social interests active in the production of knowledge. Literary studies seeks to read language closely to expose the often unconscious or hidden mechanisms of cultural power.

In this hidden co-dependency lies the discursive interest of “childhood” and “adulthood”—notwithstanding the efforts of over a century of developmental health sciences to make such categories seem natural, they remain in slippery and contentious relation. Honeyman gives much attention to the blindness and contradictions that produce the illusion that each category describes something essential, something independently verifiable. And she is outspoken about the damage such illusions bring about. But she also takes to heart Derrida’s most disconcerting proposal: all meaning, all categories depend for their efficacy on the eternal slippage, or play, of difference between bits of language. “Child” is not only “not-adult,” but not “mild,” or “milk,” or “wild,” or “chill.” Childhood, from this point of view, as her title suggests, is “unrepresentable.”

In essence, then, for all of its political language, Honeyman’s is a formalist book—it explores the techniques whereby writers have sought to represent the unrepresentable, to construct the Other out of themselves. And here the fiction she studies suggests how we do this. Over the past 150 years, writers have resorted to three different tropes to describe childhood. The first is that of silence: pre-literate, pre-verbal, subjectively undeveloped, children are seen as radically Other. The second trope ascribes specific spaces to children that are imbued with an aura of innocence and magic that only the most regressive adults can penetrate. And finally, childhood is organized developmentally, mapping stages of socialization onto processes of biological maturation. Exploring these three productive tropes of childhood comprises the core of Honeyman’s book.

Exemplifying the first mode is Henry James, to whom Honeyman devotes virtually an entire chapter. It is a very good choice. Writing on the cusp of “the century of the child,” James’s explorations of psychological interiority, the beasts that lurk in the jungle of consciousness (to bowdlerize the title of one of his better known tales), through experiments in notoriously complex and often untrustworthy narrative voices, have made him one of

the most influential writers of his time. It also led him to turn regularly to rendering the obscurities of childhood subjectivity in his fiction. As Honeyman puts it: “The inaccessibility of childhood provided him with an ironic center for his trademark ambiguity” (p. 32). This dynamic is most apparent in *What Maisie Knew*—a disturbing story (all of James’s writing about children disturbs) about a young girl caught in the middle of a vicious divorce and its aftermath. Drawing heavily (indeed, too heavily) on critics and literary theorists, Honeyman characterizes Maisie as an “empty mirror”: neither innocent nor for that matter demonic, she reflects “the process of adults constructing children” while remaining ultimately inscrutable herself. So true is James to his character’s incomprehensibility that the title could well be, as Honeyman puts it, “What *does* Maisie know?” (p. 22). Like the children of James’s better-known short story, “The Turn of the Screw,” Maisie remains to the end enigmatic, subjectively veiled, and thus an empty vessel for, the projected anxieties, desires, and fears of adults, including, as his fiction’s irony makes clear, those of the author himself.

Honeyman grounds her next chapter in the second of the strategies for representing children: spatializing childhood, turning it into a “secret garden,” a “neverland,” an Oz of magic and mystery structurally removed from the everyday realm of adult common sense. This renders structural the psychological inscrutability of James’s small protagonists. Immaculately sealed from the encroachments of adults, these spaces serve as stages for narratives of children acting with their own agency. At the same time, drenched in nostalgic adult desire, these neverlandish narratives imagine an escape into collective pasts (early nationalities, primal families) and personal memory (of “lost” innocence and the excuses of trauma) that have little, if anything, to do with the experience of children. Ranging from *Peter Pan* to *Where the Wild Things Are*, Honeyman plots the fictional maps (with some attention to actual maps of fantasy lands) that enable adults to cognitively graph onto childhood a carefully tended *adult* inwardness. The precious child becomes the inner child.

In her most ambitious chapter, Honeyman ranges widely over writings on child psychology, Disney’s empire of the cute, science fiction like Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*, comic books, and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*—a full century of material—to explore the tensions and consistencies between scientific narratives of human development and more contentious narratives of romantic regression. Suturing biological ma-

turity to social development, the medical and sociological discourses of childhood of the twentieth century have framed a host of contrasts that give Americans a remarkably adaptive way to order the world. Children are to adults as savages are to civilized peoples, as animals are to humans, as emotional is to rational, as women are to men, as others are to the self; factored in with racial hierarchies and nationalism, subjecting childhood to developmentalism both legitimated and was nurtured by social forces. Raising children proved a “natural” template for developing a childish world. Nor did the romantic celebration of childlike innocence and spontaneity provide much of a critique to this process. Honeyman points out that romanticism merely reverses the developmental narrative of the ascent to knowledge by substituting a similarly linear trope of a descent from “intuitive wisdom” (p. 81). The ideological sleight of hand that equates biological maturity with social difference remains in place: romantic searches for pure childhood echo a similar quest for savage innocence.

Honeyman’s final chapter moves her argument in a more theoretical direction, simultaneously narrowing its focus more strictly to questions of language, and expanding its scope to propose a broader politics of the split between adulthood and childhood. At root, to put the issue in terms that Honeyman does not use, non-literate children, for all their vulnerability, are not fully interpolated into language as adults are—they have not internalized the grammars and ideologies of social consciousness that comes with the full acquisition of language. This marginal status has long made children particularly attractive narrative figures for puncturing the pretences and exposing the blindnesses of adult life: Hawthorne’s Pearl, Huck Finn, Jane Eyre, Harriet the spy, Toni Morrison’s spectral Beloved all give disarmingly powerful voice to critical positions outside of society. Fictional children emerge as “sites of resistance to the inflexible, systematizing logic of adult discourse” (p. 116). Thus in her conclusion, Honeyman urges us to be sensitive to children as “agents of their own choosing” (p. 146), humans capable of thinking and communicating outside the rigid categories of adult language.

Honeyman’s argument here brings together a number of different strands of thinking about childhood. She traverses ground opened by the likes of traditional literary critics like Tony Tanner and R. W. B. Lewis, both of whom recognized the “innocent eye” of children as a resource for social critique.[3] Her focus on language as a site of oppressive authority recalls in particular the deconstructive activism of Rosalind Coward and John El-

lis, and of course the more linguistic followers of Foucault.[4] And finally, her gesture towards a modest, but real, politics of liberation and sensitivity draws on the identity politics that has animated the expansion of cultural childhood studies in the last fifteen years.

At the same time, however, Honeyman’s formalism leads to a number of difficulties. The first stems from the vexed relationship between children and childhood. It is of course true that children have suffered from the unreflective imposition of “childhood” on them, as Honeyman asserts. At the same time, however, “childhood” has been deployed—often with great violence to the social fabric of people who don’t subscribe to it—to protect children. The ongoing struggle over child labor offers one particularly powerful case in point. In short, the politics of “childhood” work much more complexly than Honeyman suggests.

Take, for instance, her concern that children have been “silenced” by often arbitrary adult dismissals of their agency. Put this way, children’s fate resembles that of women, African Americans, and other subaltern groups who have had to labor under the weight of bigoted discourses that legitimate stigmatization and discrimination. This analogy, however, can be misleading. Children are of course due human rights, rights that indeed are often ignored or revoked in the name of various kinds of adult authority—think of the way celebrations of proper parenting and family values often translate into almost punitive withholding of social services. But unlike African Americans and women, children cannot collectively articulate those rights for themselves. Children have not, or have only very occasionally, organized as political agents capable of perpetuating change over time.

Honeyman is clearly aware of these concerns, which she discusses in her first chapter. But the rhetoric of liberation and the calls against “ageism” running through the book belies an uncertainty about exactly what the purpose of childhood studies should be. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the formalism that leads her to divide the world into potentially oppressive adults and children. All deconstructive ambiguities aside, for clearly historical reasons these are inadequate categories of analysis. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Zitkala Sa, and Luther Standing Bear wrote moving accounts of their experiences as children. But in addressing popular American audiences, all of them found themselves having to explain their past by how it varied from hegemonic childhood—a childhood that was for them palpably white

and middle class. When Zitkala Sa describes the difficult regime of acquiring linguistic and cultural literacy, it is not a case of a child confronting adults, but of a Sioux struggling with a paternalist Anglo social institution. Children and adults engage in relationships, mark differences and similarities, in profoundly concrete circumstances. Similarly, the formation, deployment, resistance to, and accommodation with discourses of childhood and adulthood take place in social conditions often far removed from those involving actual children. Luther Standing Bear and his tribe, Frederick Douglass and kin, Filipinos, Congolese, and Vietnamese: all of these have been “children” to a self-proclaimed “adult” society—no matter anyone’s age.

It is this slippage of reference, the profound flexibility and almost virus-like adaptability of its discourses, that makes the categories of age so significant. And it is fiction’s propensity for embedding childhood in complex social worlds—situating Huck Finn’s discomfort in the violence of the South, or the raising children cheaper by the dozen in the technocracy of corporate America—that makes it so useful in recognizing and critically analyzing these conditions. Susan Honeyman has done well to direct our attention to the presence of these worlds in fiction, and how they are rhetorically made.

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Notes

[1] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case Of Peter Pan, Or, The Impossibility Of Children’s Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

[2] Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children’s Literature: Criticism And The Fictional Child* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child And Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture Of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood And The Idea Of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[3] Tony Tanner, *The Reign Of Wonder, Naivety And Reality In American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, And Tradition In The Nineteenth Century* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1955).

[4] Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language And Materialism: Developments In Semiology And The Theory Of Subject* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).