

Gender and Irony: Children's Literature and Its Criticism*

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Abstract

In *Under Western Eyes*, Joseph Conrad (1911/1989) writes that “women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all actions.” Here a connection between “women,” “children,” and “revolutionists” is asserted on the grounds of a shared attitude to language; but what is the nature or cause of this presumed antipathy to irony? I argue that the answers to this question have to do with what irony as a mode implies about language on the one hand, and with what the investments of “revolutionists” are in the categories of “women” and “children” on the other. These three identities are constructed in Conrad’s formulation as literal-minded, demanding a language that straightforwardly means what it says, and yet irony necessarily disrupts and undermines such notions of a literal language with a direct and unmediated relationship to the real world. Furthermore, as Jacqueline Rose (1984/1992) has argued, this Conradian stance can be found operating in the same way in relation to ideas of childhood and irony in children’s literature criticism. That such a stance is not inevitable for either feminism or children’s literature criticism will be argued by looking at parallels between feminist/queer theory and the approach to children’s literature criticism of the “Graduate Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media (CIRCL),” at the University of Reading, England.

Key words

irony, children, children’s literature criticism, feminist/queer theory, progressive change

Introduction

In her 1994 book, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon quotes from Joseph Conrad’s (1911/1989) *Under Western Eyes*, as follows: “[...] women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the

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negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action” (p. 270).¹ This quotation offers a useful way of opening up to exploration the relationship between gender, children’s literature, the political implications of children’s literature criticism and what irony can reveal about the connections between these areas.

Why consider irony in particular? What does irony have to do with gender, or perhaps even more surprisingly, children’s literature? To take the second of these two questions first, it is worth noting that the practice of children’s literature criticism has been, and continues to be, dominated by thematic readings that focus on an idea of “content” at the expense of form.² Where form is engaged with it is largely limited, as with the recent call for papers in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, to a consideration of genre³ as opposed to a more all-encompassing attention to “language itself” (Hunt, 1991, p. 102)⁴ and its vicissitudes. As I have argued elsewhere (Walsh, 2003), thematic studies tend to imply a particular conception of language as having a representational relationship to a presupposed “reality” which, as June Howard argues in another context, is never itself “*acknowledged* as a text but taken for granted as [...] natural” (Howard, 1985, p. 14). Where gender enters the scene of children’s literature criticism it tends to be femininity – or, less frequently, masculinity – as an ontologically unquestionable theme, which is to say that particular *kinds* of femininity or

¹ In fact Hutcheon offers a slightly different version of the quotation, referring to “revolutionaries” rather than to “revolutionists” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. ix).

² As originally argued by Rose in 1984; and with respect to my founding argument on the relation of “irony” to children’s literature criticism see Walsh, 2003. This remains the case, as argued by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (2016a, 2016b) both in her forthcoming article for BREAC entitled “Children’s Literature: Sexual Identity, Gender and Childhood” and also in her introductory article for this issue of *Asian Women*, entitled “Gender, Childhood and Children’s Literature: the CIRCL Approach.” For this argument with respect to literary criticism more widely, see Neil Cocks’ introduction to his recent *The Peripheral Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature and its Criticism* (Cocks, 2014).

³ See the recent call for papers for a special issue of the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* on “Genre and Black Literature” (closing date November 1st, 2015), which specifies the following possibilities: speculative fiction, regional writing, historical fiction, adaptations, picture books, films, cartoons, comics, graphic novels and poetry.

⁴ In 1991, Peter Hunt placed his noting of a “neglect of language itself” in children’s literature criticism in the context of “the emphasis placed on the *use* of children’s literature [which] has led to concentration on affect, which has led in turn to some very simplistic models of the reading process, and concentration on thematic analysis” (Hunt, 1991, p. 102).

masculinity may be subjected to question, but the actuality of sexual difference is not. This is the case with, for example, the following: Kathryn Strong Hansen's recent *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* article on different "potential paths of femininity" in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (Hansen, 2015, p. 161), Laura Hakala's piece for *Children's Literature* on limiting notions of girlhood in literature of the American South during the American civil war (Hakala, 2015), or Dawn Heinecken's essay for *The Lion and the Unicorn* critiquing the claims of young adult sports fiction series to be "empowering girls" (Heinecken, 2015, p. 24). What these three articles have in common, notwithstanding their progressivist credentials, is a focus on the construction of femininity that only goes so far. Drawing on feminist and queer theorists Shoshana Felman (1982), Denise Riley (1988, 2000), Donna Haraway (1991), and Judith Butler (1997, 1990/2006), I would argue that this kind of critique is, in the end, limited, and can be challenged and developed upon by an engagement with the radical destabilizing possibilities of irony.

However, when considering not only gender but also childhood under the sign of irony, we must concede that competence in grasping irony is generally regarded as one marker (among others) that distinguishes adults from children. According to developmental psychologist Ellen Winner, "adults do not ordinarily misunderstand metaphor and irony" whereas by implication, children do (Winner, 1997, p. 54);⁵ and as far as the literary theorist Kenneth Burke is concerned, a person's ability to understand and use irony "spontaneously" is what confirms them as "mature" language users (Burke, 1966, p. 12). But why should this be the case, and what are the further implications?

Irony and the Language of the Child

Irony, conventionally defined as saying the opposite of what is meant, is contingent on the possibility that there is no natural and inevitable relationship between the word and what it refers to, and requires a notion of language that allows that it does not necessarily mean what it says; whereas the child and its language tend to be seen as simply meaning what they say. Children

⁵ For a fuller discussion of Ellen Winner's study of children's understanding of metaphor and irony, see Walsh, S. (2011).

are just not supposed to “get” irony, since irony challenges the notion that language has a direct and unmediated relationship to the “real” world, and this notion of language is one that is, as Jacqueline Rose argues in *The Case of Peter Pan*, intimately connected with conceptions of the child:

Both Locke and Rousseau [...] recognize, in different ways, that there is no natural relation between the linguistic sign and the thing to which it refers. But they wish to by-pass this aspect of language *through* the child. Language is imperfect (Locke) or degenerate (Rousseau), which implies the possibility of some perfect, or original and uncontaminated form of expression. [...] In *Emile*, therefore, the child is being asked not only to retrieve a lost state of nature, but also to take language back to its pure and uncontaminated source in the objects of the immediate world. (Rose, 1984/1992, p. 47)

According to Rose, the investment in the notion of a directly perceivable and reproducible “real” world is observable in children’s literature and its criticism, and is rooted in a desire to redeem language from its inevitable arbitrariness and conventionality. The ironic possibility of speaking or signing the opposite of what is meant is felt as a threat or corruption and is foreclosed through the figure of the child for whom language must be envisaged as a perfect form of communication not subject to the vagaries implied by interpretability. Thus the child is configured as an identity anterior to the discourses through which it finds its existence as such.

Irony: Questioning the Category of Childhood

If irony is often discussed as something that precludes, or can be expected to preclude, the child (see for e.g. Kümmerling-Meibauer, 1999; Recchia, Howe, Ross & Alexander, 2010,⁶ Stott, 1982; Wall, 1991⁷), it is

⁶ Holly E. Recchia, Nina Howe, Hildy S. Ross, and Stephanie Alexander observe in their 2010 study of children’s understanding and use of irony in family conversations that “Previous research on children’s understanding of ironic language reveals that it is a relatively late-developing skill” (p. 256).

interesting to note that many texts that are considered to be classics of children's literature may nevertheless lay claim to being works that deploy irony quite liberally; a few examples might include J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, the complete oeuvre of Beatrix Potter, and Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*. One of English children's literature's most accomplished and insistent ironists, E. Nesbit, offers the following definition of irony in *The Story of the Amulet* (Nesbit, 1906/1975):

The children took this to be bitter irony, which means saying the exact opposite of what you mean in order to make yourself disagreeable; as when you happen to have a dirty face, and someone says, "How nice and clean you look!" (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 87).

Interestingly, the words that the children in this text take to be irony – "What's gone wrong? You've soon tired of your picnic" (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 87) – are not intended as such by the "old Nurse" who is genuinely surprised that they have returned home so soon after setting off on a day out. The children, on the other hand, think that the adventure they have just had, courtesy of the titular amulet, means that they must have been away for a whole day because "The sun looks about the same as it did when we started yesterday" (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 87). Old Nurse's understanding of things, however, is soon explained by the Psammead – a "sand-fairy" (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 11) – who tells the children that "You come back through the charm-arch at the same time as you go through it. This isn't tomorrow!" (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 88).

The children's attribution or misattribution of irony points to a fundamental question about irony, which is: "where can it be said to reside?" Is it to be found in the intentions of the author/speaker, or in the perspective of the reader/listener? But this question is not a question for irony alone, it is a question that pertains to all and any meaning; it is simply that

⁷ Discussing whether Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can properly be considered a children's book, Wall argues that "My own experience as a child, a teacher, a reader and a researcher suggests that the language and the ironies of *Huckleberry Finn* are bewildering to children, and in many cases to adolescents too" (Wall, 1991, p. 116).

the instance of irony reveals a problem with any notion of language as straightforwardly clear, transparent, and hitting its mark without fail. In short it reveals as a problem any easy division of language into the “literal” and the “figurative.”

However, in *The Story of the Amulet*, notwithstanding the question raised by the children’s identification of irony where none was intended, irony is still constituted in terms of the intentions of the speaker, because the irony – “saying the exact opposite of what you mean” – is understood to have a purpose, which is “to make yourself disagreeable.” This is an interesting (and ironic?) claim in a text in which irony is deployed so liberally as, according to its own claims, to make itself very disagreeable indeed!⁸ Moreover, irony is characterized here as indicating a self with a difference in view, a self with a quarrel to initiate, a self at odds with another or others (which might include its very self), for there is an object or other to whom the self is making itself disagreeable. Irony then is an index of division: in language, amongst selves, and/or within the self.

It is also worth noting that in this extract from *The Story of the Amulet* it is children who perceive irony (even if mistakenly), and perceive it to be directed at them by old Nurse, an adult figure of authority. The irony in such a case is characterized as “bitter” but this implies that perhaps not all forms of irony are equally bitter and that maybe it is only “bitter irony” which is motivated by the desire “to make yourself disagreeable.” Set in relation to this, the example of irony that is offered is illuminating. In the first place the disagreeableness of irony here seems to be about the indirect policing of children’s appearance and behavior. If read as an analogy that accounts for the children’s assumption that old Nurse’s reaction to them was ironic, this policing can be understood as being undertaken by an adult.⁹ However, this reading can be called into question in two ways: firstly, according to the text, old Nurse is not being ironic and the children have fallen into an error in assuming she is; thus irony here does not originate with the adult but with the children. Secondly, the narration here

⁸ Indeed, allied to this is the rather marked similarity, throughout the text, between the narrator and the Psammead.

⁹ “Could it be that old Nurse had so changed that she no longer cared that they should have been away from home for twenty-four hours – all night in fact – without any explanation whatever?” (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 88).

means that it is difficult to keep “adult” and “child” securely separate from each other since what the children “took” the old Nurse’s words to be is conveyed from a narratorial perspective that does not exactly share their position and yet is not clearly differentiated from them either. The role of the ironist, though assumed by the children to be taken on by an adult, is not reserved to adulthood within the narration since it both exonerates old Nurse as responding to what seems to her to be the children’s sudden re-appearance with genuine “amazement,” and explains “bitter irony” as “saying [...] the opposite of what *you* mean in order to make *yourself* disagreeable” (Nesbit, 1906/1975, p. 87, emphases added). The “you,” constructed as one who does not know what irony is, might be assumed to be a child rather than an adult, given that according to the children’s belief it is adults who deploy irony, not children; but the ignorant “you” is neither securely adult nor child in this formulation, since in *this* text it is the “children” that *do know* what irony is, even if they misattribute it, and the adult here is neither aware of the possibility of irony nor a wielder of it. Once again the example is illuminating in that the second person pronoun shifts from being the employer of irony to being the object of it, and thus the question of the location and originating point of irony resurfaces, for the ironist becomes a nameless and indeterminate “someone” marked only by either an attempt to instill a certain propriety in the “you” who “happen[s] to have a dirty face,” or conversely may be read as making an attempt (a quarrelsome or disagreeable attempt perhaps, depending on one’s point of view) to redefine that very notion of propriety; which of these options it will be depends on the reading of the narrative perspective.

Connected to the question of the location of irony is an issue that Jonathan Arac quotes Shelley Fisher Fishkin as drawing attention to in relation to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and that is that “An ironist ‘faces two problems,’ namely, that the ‘reader may miss the point’ and that ‘the reader may get the wrong point’” (Arac, 1997, p. 14). Indeed, the question, as Arac goes on to suggest, becomes one of how to argue *what* the point is and fundamentally hinges on a question of authority – which is to say, *who* is it that has the authority to say what exactly “*the*” point is? Because if irony is understood as saying the opposite of what is meant, it cannot in a certain sense avoid saying both what it supposedly does not “really” mean as well as what it supposedly does. Thus the question then becomes: on what grounds might one privilege a particular reading, that is

to say the reading of the “meant”?

Ironizing Irony in Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*

What then of the opening quotation from Conrad which states that “[...] women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action” (Conrad, 1911/1989, p. 270)? What is the connection between “women, children, and revolutionists” and what is the nature or cause of their presumed antipathy to irony? As Denise Riley notes in *The Words of Selves*, as far as political and ethical engagement goes, on the whole irony has a “spasmodically poor reputation” (Riley, 2000, p. 14), and “still periodically attracts charges of being evasive” (Riley, 2000, p. 163), and the quotation from *Under Western Eyes* would seem to fit into such a mold.

In this extract irony is configured as undermining the certitudes on which “faith” and “devotion” must rest, and thereby as stripping “all action” of its *raison d’être*. Interestingly, irony is implicitly constituted as masculine, adult, and rational in its opposition to the feminized and infantilized irrationality of “instinct,” “faith,” and “devotion”; thus action is also thereby constituted as having its foundation in what is constituted as childish irrationality. Irony, it seems, becomes a masculine counsel of abstention, hence the charge of “negation”: for irony here appears to deny the possibility of change.

But who is it that speaks here? This quotation is, in *Under Western Eyes*, narrated as part of a dialogue between a female revolutionist, Sophia Antonovna, and a male seeming-revolutionist, Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov, who is in the confidence of the revolutionists but working as a spy for the Tsarist Russian government. It is the female die-hard revolutionist, Sophia Antonovna, who makes the claim about irony and the hostility of “women,” “children,” and “revolutionists” to it:

“Well, Sophia Antonovna,” his air of reluctant concession was genuine in so far that he was really loath to part with her without testing her sincerity by a question it was impossible to bring about in any way; “well, Sophia Antonovna, if that is so, then —”

“The creature has done justice to himself,” the woman observed,

as if thinking aloud.

“What? Ah yes! Remorse,” Razumov muttered with equivocal contempt.

“Don’t be harsh, Kirylo Sidorovitch, if you have lost a friend.” There was no hint of softness in her tone, only the black glitter of her eyes seemed detached for an instant from vengeful visions.

“He was a man of the people. The simple Russian soul is never wholly impenitent. It’s something to know that.”

“Consoling?” insinuated Razumov, in a tone of inquiry.

“Leave off railing,” she checked him explosively. “Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action. Don’t rail! Leave off [...] I don’t know how it is, but there are moments when you are abhorrent to me [...]” (Conrad, 1911/1989, p. 270)

In this unfolding exchange, there is a repeated narrative of contrast between exteriorities and interiorities, of the apparent meaning of speech acts set against a questioning of the “air” or “tone” in which they are expressed. Razumov’s interiority is stated from the outset to match his exterior expressions only to a certain and limited extent thereby suggesting that it is more usual for Razumov’s speech acts to be completely at odds with his self. In short, as a spy, what Razumov says is habitually and necessarily the opposite of what he means. Thus, Razumov would appear to be the representative ironist in this scene, and through him irony might be understood to be constituted as unethical in this text; for, while he is concerned to “test” the “sincerity” of the woman, Razumov himself is busy dissembling.

Razumov, however, does not have a monopoly on seeming, for the apparently unequivocal revolutionist Sophia Antonovna is no more transparent to him than he is to her. Antonovna finishes Razumov’s sentence “*as if thinking aloud*” (emphasis added), the implication being that this unguarded thinking in Razumov’s presence might be as truly spontaneous as “his air of reluctant concession was genuine.” Moreover, Antonovna’s tone does not match the meaning of her words, for while she appeals to Razumov not to be “harsh,” her tone has nothing of the “softness” that

such a sentiment might imply. It is “*only* the black glitter of her eyes” that appears to equate to her words, and only insofar as they “*seemed* detached for an instant from vengeful visions” (emphases added). There is thus a difference between Antonovna and Razumov in that while it is implied that there may be as much a disjuncture in how she appears as there is in how he appears, that disjuncture may also be read as an effect of a difference in perspective. In other words, the disjuncture between Antonovna’s “tone” and the momentary look of the eyes is entirely at the level of how she *seems* to *him*, and it is no accident that what can be observed here, in this elaboration on irony, is a known man looking at an unknown and ultimately unseen woman, unknowable because she is unknown and unseen to him. Nevertheless, at least one thing that is known about Razumov is also somewhat uncertain, which is his contempt that is “equivocal,” and yet this too is a doubleness which returns Razumov to the authenticity of his inauthenticity.

Razumov’s desire to “test” Sophia Antonovna’s “sincerity” indicates a concern, despite his own dissembling, to figure out whether she is holding anything back in their exchange, such as, for example, an incipient knowledge of his double-dealing. In other words, ironically enough, Razumov is engaged in a quest to determine whether Antonovna’s appearance (of being completely undivided within herself) matches the reality, but what becomes apparent here is that this reality is, and can only ever be, reality as it *seems* to be to him. In the interplay between the two characters, whereas Razumov may be read as continually engaged in a performance (“his air of” and “insinuated [...] in a tone of”), any limited element that would suggest the same of Antonovna – the seeming detachment of her eyes from “vengeful visions,” for example – is an effect of Razumov’s perception of her. For Antonovna, on the other hand, it would appear that “the simple Russian soul” represented by Ziemianitch is an essential, singular identity. This singular soul however, is not undivided, because it is a self that is “never wholly impenitent” and therefore never wholly one thing. This becomes evident just before the text’s only direct claim about irony, which is Antonovna’s response to Razumov’s question which she takes as obliquely conveying derision about the possibility of finding consolation in a betrayer’s remorse. Thus, while the supposedly single-minded female revolutionist is able to respond to the penitence of Ziemianitch who she believes to be the betrayer (the “man of the people” who is therefore charac-

teristically “double” to her), Razumov, himself a double-agent, is not. Of course, it might be said that this is because he, necessarily saying the opposite of what he means or feels by virtue of his position as a spy, knows both that there was no need for Ziemianitch to feel remorse since he was not the informant and that it is he himself who is the betrayer.

Antonovna’s acceptance of, and ability to find consolation in, the double-ness of “the simple Russian soul” cuts across the apparent inability to brook ambivalence demonstrated in her injunction on Razumov to “remember,” which can be read as a call to him to cohere himself to the properly undivided identity of the revolutionist. This is a further irony given Antonovna’s understanding of the “man of the people” as not, after all, “simply” one. Antonovna’s call on Razumov to “remember” indicates, that as far as she is concerned, Razumov already knows what she is referring to, and “remember” thus also indicates an identity – that of the “revolutionist” – that is already in circulation and that he is expected to recognize. She reads Razumov’s failure to conform to this identity in what she believes to be his use of irony, which she regards as potentially undermining their revolutionary position because it constitutes ambivalence to the cause. However, a yet further irony is that Antonovna herself is not conforming to the unitariness of that revolutionist identity either, precisely because she *can* find consolation in the doubleness of the “simple Russian soul,” and moreover, when she appeals to Razumov not to be “harsh” she is asking him, in her own terms, to be untrue to himself. Finally, the very injunction to “remember” constitutes an acknowledgment on Antonovna’s part of the inessential nature of the “revolutionist” identity she is calling on Razumov to inhabit since it is an identity that has to be performed and is therefore not the uninhibited “truth” of either Razumov or herself.

As for the relationship of “women, children, and revolutionists” to irony – whilst each identity is implicitly set up in relation to the adult, male anti-revolutionist as essential, inviolable categories, the very fact of their recognition of irony already constitutes a corrosion of the innocence upon which the categories rely. This is the case because “women, children, and revolutionists” could not “hate irony” without seeing or recognizing it, and in order to see irony the gap between what is said and what is meant is affirmed as present.

Both Nesbit and Conrad produce figures supposedly inherently hostile to irony – the child, the woman, the revolutionist – and yet both texts ironize

that supposed antipathy, and in doing so challenge the category distinctions of “child” and “adult,” “women” and “man,” “revolutionist” and non- or anti-revolutionist. It is a certain kind of knowledge that threatens the distinction of categories: in the Nesbit, the children misattribute irony but “know” what it is, and this in itself reveals the irony of their misattribution; in the Conrad, children, women and revolutionists hate irony, and in doing so implicitly reveal their “knowledge” of it, which interrogates any claim to a unitary identity, protected from the divisions inherent to irony.

Irony’s Challenge to the Empirical World

Jacqueline Rose’s analysis of the construction of the child as prediscursive prefigures and parallels Judith Butler’s (1990/2006) critique in *Gender Trouble* of even *feminist* categorical distinctions between sex and gender, where gender is defined as the cultural interpretation of an immutable reality:

[I]f the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. [...] As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. This [is a] construction of “sex” as the radically unconstructed [...] (Butler, 1990/2006, pp. 9–10).

This kind of critique of the investment in prediscursive identities and challenge to category distinctions is what I have also read above as implicit in the figure of irony. For, as Paul de Man argues, tropes like irony should not be “understood semantically as a figurative meaning that derives from literal, proper denomination,”

Rather the reverse is the case. The trope is not a derived,

marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such (de Man, 1979, p. 105).

Furthermore, since Paul de Man argues that irony “transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of and in language” (de Man, 1971/1983, p. 213), one reason we could argue that “revolutionists” should hate irony is precisely because of their supposed investment in a cohered and universal subject identity that is anterior to discourse, which is to be represented and/or fought for, the kind of identity that Sophia Antonovna calls upon Razumov to “remember.” As Rose argues, “children” habitually fulfill this stabilizing role and, as Butler argues, “women” not only fulfill it in the discourses against which feminism is aimed, but can also end up doing so within the very politics intended to liberate them from these identifications (Butler, 1990/2006, pp. 4-8).

Implications for the Criticism of Children’s Literature

What then are the consequences, for children’s literature criticism, of following through Butler’s argument that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 34); or Rose’s argument that “[t]here is no child behind the category of ‘children’s fiction’, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (Rose, 1984/1992, p. 10)? In other words, what are the consequences of reading identity as constructed by and within discourse, and not as anterior to it? Such work, exemplified by the University of Reading’s “Graduate Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media (CIRCL),” is expressly concerned with *not* reifying a notion of the “real” child or “real” woman. In taking this position such criticism cannot then logically go on to make pronouncements about how children will read or respond to texts. As Butler notes, “there is very little agreement [...] on what it is that constitutes or ought to constitute, the category of women” (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 2) and in the end this is the case too with “children,” for, despite all protestations to the contrary, children’s literature critics do not agree on the definition of

childhood.¹⁰

Following from this, if any particular narrative about childhood (or for that matter any other identity) were to be privileged as the real and correct one, this would be a reification of a construction given a spurious authority detracting from the question of whose interests are served by such a construction. The questions to be posed to any such construction are: “Who is talking and to whom?” (Rose, 1984/1992, p. 12); and “who is seeing whom and from where?” (Riley, 2000, p. 9) – these are the questions implicitly prompted in an ironic reading.

To read identity as always already constructed can be argued by “revolutionists” to weaken their political cause, for on what basis can a representational politics operate if the identity it seeks to represent cannot be defended as “authentic,” or as the “right,” the “true,” and the “real” one? This might be understood to be what is meant by irony’s “negation of [...] faith,” as Conrad puts it. But Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers characterize their social constructionist position as “agnostic [...] rather than] atheist [...] about the God-state of the real. We live,” they write, “in epistemic doubt”:

Sometimes it is assumed that to view children and childhoods as constructed is to claim that there is no material frame to a child (no body that can be hurt) [...] but] social constructionism does not [...] imply an unthinking relativism in which “anything goes” [...] rather it is a way of thinking that argues that w[e] have to strive to treat children benignly within a world of the *practically real* (that which passes for “real” in practice), while at the same time always being alert to the constructed character of that reality (Rogers & Rogers, 1998, pp. 183–184).

Likewise Butler argues that:

To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, [...] rather it is] to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of this, see Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994.

consolidate and augment their hegemony through [...] felicitous self-naturalization (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 45).

From this, it follows that to characterize attention to the cultural construction of identity as nihilistic solipsism, or, in other words, to see it as negation, side-steps our implicatedness as *participant* observers in the construction of reality.¹¹

Irony, however, has been claimed as a potential remedy to this, and as a way of attempting to acknowledge one's own implicatedness in language. Indeed, in "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway (1991) has argued for irony as a political strategy, which she sees not as a way of attacking feminism, but as a way of opening it up to questioning whilst remaining within the fold. For her, "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149), hence the discomposure experienced in the face of irony because of the way it questions stability in meaning is fundamentally and politically necessary. Ultimately Haraway positions irony as "faithful to feminism" in the way that "blasphemy is faithful," rather than faithful after the manner of "reverent worship and identification" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). Haraway's position is one which welcomes irony as dissent both on the grounds of its challenge and because it implicitly recognizes what it interrogates.

For Judith Butler irony can be found in the very structure of language and its use. She argues that words intended to wound, "words such as 'nigger' and 'spick'", can be "decontextualiz[ed] and recontextualiz[ed] [...] through radical acts of [repetition and] misappropriation" and that this,

constitutes the basis of an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time. Such words do wound, and yet [...] "racist structures are vulnerable." I take this to apply to racist linguistic structures as well. (Butler, 1997, pp. 100–101)

¹¹ See Walsh, 2002.

This idea is echoed by Denise Riley, who argues that “The word has the inbuilt capacity to interrogate itself, a latent capacity sparked into life by [...] repetition” (Riley, 2000, p. 156). As her figure for this idea, Riley uses Echo, the site of the passive repetition of Narcissus’s words. She also links Echo’s repetitions to irony, and claims that though the feminine Echo/irony “is unsparingly condemned to passivity [...] her very passivity possesses its own strong agency. [...] For] Condemned like Echo herself to listen attentively, irony hears and takes note when the language around it, like the lady, doth protest too much” (Riley, 2000, p. 157). In other words, irony is understood here as a figure for a lack of fixity in language, and for Butler and Riley this is a reason for optimism because they see it as heralding the possibility of progressive change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion of irony would seem to undermine any persisting notion of language as simply representational, or of ideology as something a critic can detach herself from and diagnose in/for others. Likewise, the notion that any discourse purporting to give an account of the “real” world (such as “history” for example, or “science”) can be privileged as somehow outside of discursive production and so used as a bench-mark from which to judge the “correctness” of the work of literature is also problematized. For if, extrapolating from de Man, irony is the *condition* of language, the corollary is that “[t]here is no such thing as faithful and literal speech, which is at one with its world, and then ironic or distanced speech, which would speak with a sense of distance, quotation or otherness” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 129). Thus the so-called instance of “irony,” read closely, merely serves to underline that the constitutive structure of language is not one that can be escaped through recourse to a position outside of language, through, for example, an appeal to “reality” or the (gendered) “body” since these too are themselves always already effects of discourse.

That irony is linked to ideas of self-reflexivity by both Haraway and Riley (Riley, 1988, p. 98) is also telling with respect to the unease of children’s literature critics in the face of the ironic, for the problems around the question of irony result in a tendency (not limited to children’s literature criticism) to produce thematic readings that implicitly mobilize a conception of

language as “reflecting” an assumed “reality.”¹² Attention to irony, by contrast, “consists in dragging authority as such into a scene which it cannot master” (Felman, 1982, p. 8) by revealing language’s relationship to the supposed “real” to be always subject to perspective; it opens things up to question and leaves scope for holding two or more potentially incompatible ideas in play at the same time. Irony, not as a trope but as the condition of language, refuses the petrification of meaning.

¹² For related discussions on this subject see Walsh, 2003.

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