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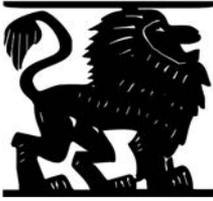
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Transatlantic Elegies for Boyhood: First-Person Adventure Narratives After 1865

Eleanor Reeds

Perhaps no authenticating gesture is more disingenuous in children's literature than the assurance that the adult writer speaks for or to a real child.¹ The ethical implications of such a gesture have been a major concern for scholars in the field: Perry Nodelman's famous essay of 1992, for example, describes the domination at work when adults speak on behalf of children as akin to imperialism. In Thomas Bailey Aldrich's professedly autobiographical *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1869), the narrator identifies the eponymous protagonist as a past version of himself and thus claims knowledge of this representative "bad boy." Aldrich, however, corrects his initial assertion of absolute identification by acknowledging a chronological fissure: "I am, or rather I was, that boy" (1). As Maria Nikolajeva has considered specifically in relation to children's literature, all "first-person narratives demonstrate a dialogical nature by the very fact that subjectivity is split between the experiencing and the narrating self" (201), drawing on a distinction that Dorrit Cohn notes was first identified by Leo Spitzer.² Aldrich's novel has been described in similar terms as part of the nineteenth-century genre of the "boy book": "an autobiographical form essentially defined by a separation of narrator and protagonist" (Jacobson 21). In this essay, I argue that the temporal split between the "I" that experiences and the "I" that narrates in retrospective accounts of boyhood like Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy*, particularly when the latter asserts his "cognitive privilege" (Cohn 151) as an adult over a child, necessarily structures the text as an elegy for a lost state. The elegy is usually regarded as an occasional genre, mimetic of mourning after the death of an actual person: we might think of Milton's "Lycidas" or Shelley's "Adonais" as canonical examples. Yet these very titles suggest that the deceased is a poetic construct and that

loss becomes detached from the contingency of death: W. H. Auden thus described “Adonais” as a poem in which “both Shelley and Keats disappear as people” (qtd. in Ramanzani 18). The narratives of boyhood from the latter part of the nineteenth century that I address in this essay share this property of elegy: the remembered and mourned for object recedes from reality into an unrealizable ideal, an imagined boy whom no real boy could become.

In defining the genre of boyhood elegy by its formal structure of retrospective first-person narration, I am continuing a tradition that acknowledges the elegy’s origins as formal rather than occasional: the Greek term *elegeia* designated a poem in elegiac couplets (Braden and Flower 397; Brogan and Cole 396). The elegy has continued to attract formal definitions as it has lent its name to other metrical and stanzaic forms, such as the alternately rhymed quatrain of iambic pentameter popularized by Gray and Wordsworth in the late eighteenth century, known as the “elegiac stanza” (Brogan and Fogle 397). I suggest that narrative as well as poetic forms can be described as elegiac, especially those that invoke a temporal disjunction that, as Coleridge remarked of the elegy as a genre, “presents everything as lost and gone” (qtd. in Kennedy 4). By designating late nineteenth-century accounts of boyhood as elegiac, I am also emphasizing what David Kennedy has described as the “highly fictionalized” mode of the elegy as a “rhetorical strategy and cultural performance” (125).³ While the scope of my own study is limited to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the elegy offers the potential to consider the texts under consideration as part of a transhistorical continuum—there are, as Jahan Ramazani notes, “transhistorical tendencies long embedded in the form” (9)—as well as a specifically Victorian phenomenon in which the supposedly lost and mourned for object is a particular brand of adventurous boy.

Paradoxically, in telling their own tales from the grammatical position of the subject of their narratives, I argue that boys such as Jim Hawkins and Huckleberry Finn are exposed as the subjects of fictions presented by adults. However, the predominant mode of reading these texts has been elegiac in its presupposition of an actual referent that preceded the production of the text. Elegy studies, stemming from Peter Sacks’ still hugely influential *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), often continues to critique the elegy through the psychoanalytic lens of mourning. While I have drawn on a more formal understanding of elegy in order to define the genre of boyhood elegy, elegiac reading instead follows an occasional model of elegy that insists upon “a true sense of the experience of loss” instead of assuming, as I intend to, “that an essential lack is already inscribed within language” (Sacks xii). Elegiac reading was the narrative practice that underscored a cornerstone of the scientific discourse around boyhood in the nineteenth century, specifically the theory of recapitulation

in which the individual is understood to mimic the progress of civilization. This theory claimed to recognize a primitive state that it actually constructed through retrospective narrative accounts, particularly in its depiction of boyhood as a feral, savage, and libertine moment in the progress toward adulthood (Kidd 16–18; Jacobson 13; Shuttleworth 4). This mode of reading is also exemplified in modern literary criticism: for instance, Marcia Jacobson’s biographical readings of the boy book suggest that the genre predominantly drew on authors’ life experiences and responded to these authors’ need for recalling their childhoods at specific moments in adulthood.

In this essay, I propose an alternative mode of ironic reading, imagined as the potential response of a child rather than an adult reader to boyhood elegy, and one that uncovers the absence of real boys in the texts ostensibly addressed to them, although, of course, these texts were read by children of both genders. In terming this mode of reading “ironic,” I am drawing on the definition of irony, associated with theorists like Paul de Man, as “open[ing] a point of view outside the text’s own frame” (Colebrook 733). More specifically, I am making use of Mike Cadden’s description of how irony in children’s literature can be manifested through “helping the reader recognize the limits of the young adult consciousness in the text” (146). The centrality of this irony to children’s literature has been recognized by Nodelman, for whom the “perception of conflict between . . . two points of view, one innocent or ignorant and the other . . . knowing” defines the characteristic “experience of double awareness” for the implied reader of children’s literature (*The Hidden Adult* 21; 209).

In this essay, I also suggest that the late nineteenth-century nostalgia for boyhood was an inherently transatlantic phenomenon. Indeed, its spatial mobility may be accounted for by its status as a desire for a prelapsarian state, a past—whether it manifests itself through national history or individual memory—that is markedly fictional and may never have existed at all. I will continue the transatlantic chronology that begins with Aldrich by turning to Robert Louis Stevenson’s use of a similar retrospective style of narration in *Treasure Island*. I will then explore the role of boy narrators who appear not to be mediated by any adult perspective in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Edith Nesbit’s *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. The unmistakable irony employed by Twain and Nesbit extends an invitation to their child readers to resist, rather than to imitate, the models of boyhood apparently proposed in these texts, models that were and are used to govern children’s behavior by adult-led organizations like the Boy Scouts.

In 1870, William Dean Howells described *The Story of a Bad Boy* as “a new thing . . . in American literature” (qtd. in Jacobson 1). What the novel itself claims to inaugurate is the tradition of featuring a narrator who is “a real human boy” unlike “those faultless young gentlemen who generally feature in narratives of this kind” (1). Aldrich is keen to reassure readers that his protagonist is far from being an “impossible boy in a story-book” (1) but the very performance of boyhood that the adult narrator is able to assume so easily calls this into doubt. The narrator may have preferred “Robinson Crusoe” to “the missionary tracts presented . . . by the Rev. Wibird Hawkins” (1) when he was a boy, but this indicates a choice made between adult-authored models of boyhood rather than a rejection of such models: indeed, as well as a generic partiality, it registers a preference for a literary character over an embodied mentor. The narrator’s pose of authenticity appears to have been recognized as suspect before it even reached its intended audience and this recognition mediated original readers’ encounters with the novel. When *The Story of a Bad Boy* was first published in the American periodical, *Our Young Folks*, illustrations were provided by Solomon Eytinge, Jr., including a fascinating “Initial Letter” in which a “T” is formed by an illustration of a figure we can assume to be the bad boy, Tom. The boy’s figure forms an “I” that a tree branch upon his head transforms into his initial, “T.” In a biblical allusion to the loss of innocence, Tom munches on an apple, yet his appropriation of the tree branch as a headdress suggests a charming and playful wildness. Tom’s status as a creation of the text rather than an actual referent is thus foregrounded by his embodiment in the materiality of the book rather than the world.⁴ The natural landscape is depicted as the location of figures constructed by the text but this is a landscape divorced from any sense of historical context, a landscape bound by time but floating free from it in the impenetrable enclosure of the narrative. Regardless of the denotative relationship to sociopolitical reality that settings such as the antebellum North maintain, the temporal gap between adult narrator and boy protagonist entraps the boy protagonist in a world that is inaccessible to the reader except through the text’s attempt to reconstruct it.

Kenneth Kidd has argued that “texts of boyhood at the turn of the century . . . memorialize lost American boyhoods” and his examples draw attention to the significance of national as well as personal narratives of the loss of boyhood by considering the “racial elegy” visible in such texts as Charles Eastman’s memoir, *Indian Boyhood* (102). *The Story of a Bad Boy* also operates through a national as well as an individual sense of a break with the past: it is, as Lorinda B. Cohoon emphasizes, a postbellum narrative of an antebellum childhood in which the central character’s relocation from the South to the North “dramatizes . . . the complexities of the Civil War” (21).

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* similarly shapes a narrative of antebellum boyhood, yet Huck's first-person narration has an immediacy that forces the reader to perceive split subjectivity solely within the nation rather than within the individual figure of the boy as well.

The Civil War and the abolition of slavery provide unmistakable ideological and experiential disjunctions between the past and present of the United States, a relative sense of time rendered by Twain through specifying, albeit vaguely, a historical setting as "Forty or Fifty Years Ago" on his novel's title page. These disjunctions were within the living memory of a generation and thus became convenient milestones in a man's as well as a nation's *Bildungsroman*. But, as Aldrich's opening reminds us, these narratives—while often writ large in discourses of the nation—can also be represented through an individual character when any man writes of what it was like to be a boy. Whereas scholars like Marcia Jacobson have focused on a specifically American sociopolitical context and its production of nostalgia for boyhood, elegies for boyhood were also written by British authors like Robert Louis Stevenson, whose *Treasure Island* offered an individualized recollection of boyhood in which specific historical and national contexts function far less prominently. By recognizing the boyhood elegy as a genre produced by both British and American authors in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is possible to examine how shared narrative structures were used to meditate on the illusory nature of boyhood both within and across national boundaries.

Such an approach reflects the actual conditions under which these texts were often produced. For example, John Seelye argues that *Treasure Island*'s emergence from the transatlantic circulation of people and texts is representative of all adventure fiction in this period. Robert Louis Stevenson dedicated his 1882 novel to his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, whom he described as "an American gentleman, in accordance with whose classic taste the following narrative has been designed." Stevenson also began his narrative with a versified address, "To the Hesitating Purchaser," that introduces his transatlantic precursors: "Kingston . . . Ballantyne the brave . . . Cooper of the wood and wave." Stevenson goes on to suggest that young readers will enjoy his tale as long as their tastes demonstrate continuity with the past, indicating that his authorial evocation of the lineage of adventure fiction must be paired with a similar desire to look back among readers. The events of *Treasure Island* and their relation are set at least a century prior to its publication as an older Jim Hawkins is requested by "Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen" to take up his pen "in the year of grace 17—" (3; ch. I). There is an intergenerational and specifically masculine dynamic of production that emerges in Stevenson's 1894 essay, "My First Book," in which we are told that Stevenson's father was the second "boy" with whom

he collaborated, and this dynamic is rehearsed in the framing of Hawkins' tale, interrupted as it is by three chapters in which the narrative is continued by Dr. Livesey.⁵ The chronological distance between Hawkins' act of writing and our act of reading is a historical one through which we traverse in order to return to a time in which pirates haunted the British coastline.

However, it is Hawkins' claim that "I am, or rather I was, that boy myself," rather than the context of British sea power and empire building, that is the most significant structure to render boyhood as a past state in *Treasure Island*. The final paragraph of the novel tells us of Jim's refusal to return physically to the island and his inability to avoid doing so in his nightmares. Both Long John Silver and the adventures on *Treasure Island* were first envisaged in Jim's rich imagination. They emerged to become even more fearful realities and have now receded into his psychological landscape. There may be a sense of continuity between the experiencing "I" and the narrating "I," but this is achieved through the narratives and landscapes of memory from which the material existence of the boy as well as his subjectivity can be erased, like the "curiosity" of the pirates that Jim still possesses on which "not a trace of writing now remains" (162; ch. 29). Stevenson's unplotable island functions like the ever-changing Mississippi River that proves so troublesome for the amateur navigator, Huckleberry Finn, by ensuring that both characters and readers are dislocated from familiar and knowable spaces, and so must instead rely on literary and textual structures to get their bearings. While the original magazine publication of *Treasure Island* under the pseudonym Captain George North authenticated the narrative through a supposed wealth of maritime experience on the part of the author, the opening address that accompanied the publication of *Treasure Island* in a single volume admits of the purely literary sources for Stevenson's novel.⁶ This paratextual material thus exposes the origin of Jim's narrative as imaginative rather than experiential.

The advanced, though still tentative, maturity of the narrating "I" compared to the experiencing "I" is usually — as Cannon Schmitt identifies in his discussion of Stevenson's use of technical language — indicated by "interpolations from the narrating present into the narrated past that emphasize the fuller perspective . . . acquired since the events being narrated" (62–63). One of the most crucial markers of Jim's increasing maturity in *Treasure Island* is his acknowledgment of Long John Silver's duplicitous behavior toward him. As Marah Gubar has noted, *Treasure Island* is "the cautionary tale of a boy who is seduced and betrayed by adult raconteurs" (*Artful Dodgers* 27). The reader is never allowed to inhabit the younger Jim's experience of seduction, however, because the older Jim introduces Silver by sharing his hindsight with the reader. The narrator distances himself from the foolish child he once was by telling us that Silver's whisper "was very flattering, as I thought"

and that “he was too deep, and too ready, and too clever for me” (44; ch. 8). Perhaps the most overt interpolation by the older Jim appears in chapter 22, “How My Sea Adventure Began,” when the narrator carefully evaluates the “folly” of the younger Jim’s decision to abandon his companions: he admits that later events suggest that this decision was ultimately a fortunate one but still experiences shame at the dishonor of this subterfuge. This shame can only be expurgated and this dishonor accounted for by the act of increasing the distance between the Jim of the tale and the Jim who tells it: after all, “I was only a boy” (119).

Treasure Island demonstrates the limitations of being “only a boy” rather than presenting a fantasy of power: Jim’s role is far more often that of a witness than a participant. The moment when he discovers that Silver is plotting a mutiny is an apparent triumph of a boy’s worth and achievements as Jim is toasted by the adults to whom he entrusts this information: this worth is expressed by the doctor as he observes that “Jim is a noticing lad” (66; ch. 12). Jim’s ability to notice, however, is a peculiar form of agency and power. Chapter 11, “What I Heard in the Apple Barrel,” offers exactly that: a verbatim presentation of dialogue. This is only interrupted once by a commentary by Jim in which the reader is left to articulate Jim’s emotional response and we are told of an action never performed, never possible, perhaps never even really contemplated except in retrospect: “You may imagine how I felt when I heard this. . . . I think, if I had been able, that I would have killed him through the barrel” (58). The verbal testimony, we are told, was offered to Livesey, Smollett, and Trelawney in order to save the day; the elder Jim presents it to a reader in a rehearsal of his role as narrator when a boy. The only marker of Jim’s physical presence in these events is his ability to narrate them: even as a boy, Jim recedes from the realm of action to the realm of narration, functioning as a removed third-person narrative presence without material existence. Jim tells his own tale but such an assertion of voice paradoxically strips him of his role as an agent, instead rendering him as always only a witness to events.

By framing the narrative of a boy’s adventures as a pseudo-memoir, Stevenson appears to promise his readers intimate access to the boy, Jim. However, such access is foreclosed by the very means by which it appears to be offered: namely, Jim’s voice. Rather than functioning as a window into the consciousness of an adventurous agent, Jim’s voice is a screen behind which no embodied person may be present: he is nothing *but* voice. This reading of *Treasure Island* invites us to reevaluate its protagonist’s most famous American precursor, the consummate storyteller Huckleberry Finn. When Twain and Stevenson, already avid readers of each other’s works, met in April 1888, Twain praised the “always brilliant” Thomas Bailey Aldrich for

“the felicity of phrasing with which he clothed these children of his fancy” (*Autobiography* 229).⁷ While Twain was referring to Aldrich’s “humorous sayings,” the turn of phrase suggests Twain’s recognition of the adventurous boy as a creation of authorial fancy, constructed through verbal skill alone.

Notably, the structural unity of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as the title indicates, is provided solely by Huck’s continuity as a narrator and participant in these largely episodic adventures. Huck’s tall tales enable him to escape tricky situations, most evidently in the staging of his own death in order to remove himself from his father’s power. However, Huck also becomes a character in the plots shaped by the genre-savvy Tom Sawyer that bookend Twain’s novel and, in many cases, Huck’s presence is vacated as he functions, like Jim Hawkins, primarily as a witness. Huck’s sharp hearing is the sensory skill that makes him suited for the role of third-person narrator: he has a tendency to report in much detail conversations he overhears, regardless of their import. Huck’s sense of responsibility to offer an accurate account of events, his commitment to mimesis, is articulated by his own need to offer a disclaimer in chapter 29 when he “can’t give the old gent’s words, nor . . . imitate him” because of his English accent (249).⁸ This aligns him with the author, Mark Twain, who prefaces Huck’s narrative with an explanatory note, signed “The Author,” about the dialects used in the novel, crediting “personal familiarity” for the “pains-taking” verisimilitude offered (xxxiii). Both he and Huck try to tell the “truth” in their books (1; ch. I), and this functions as their *raison d’être*: Twain himself is a textual construction of the embodied Samuel L. Clemens.

Despite occasional moments of retrospective interpolation—for instance, Huck informing us he hasn’t seen Mary-Jane, although he has often thought of her, since the parting that has just occurred in the narrative—Huck’s subjectivity is not obviously ruptured by the temporal gap between experience and narration. Instead the readers of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* themselves provide a more mature perspective on past events in the context of postbellum society’s legal, if not moral, consensus after the abolition of slavery. Huck’s naivety necessarily imposes the role of moral commentator on the reader when Huck experiences attacks of socially shaped conscience about his role in facilitating Jim’s escape from slavery. Huck believes this is a “sin” in the eyes of God, but he is unable to renounce it and “do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger’s owner and tell where he was” (269; ch. 31). A modern reader’s shudder at Huck’s terminology now accomplishes in miniature much of the intended alienation from this moral perspective that Twain assumed from his initial readers. Huck appears as a very moral character in his instinctive reluctance toward an act that would make him complicit in the contemptible system of slavery: this is not

an insight of the narrator but a function of the absolute incongruence between the ostensible values of readers in 1885 and those of the antebellum South.

The role of younger readers—as well as perhaps British readers of all ages—is particularly anticipated by Twain because these readers would only have historical rather than living knowledge of a slave-owning society and thus recognize Huck as a product of an earlier stage on the road to a more civilized nation. While it may be a “very risky business” to discuss actual children, Marah Gubar calls for scholars of children’s literature to recognize how children “can function as . . . participants in the production of culture” (452). According to the framework offered by Cadden for evaluating how authors may or may not enable participation, Twain’s “artful depiction of artfulness” (146) is an ethical example of writing in the voice of a young person in which irony is the chief tool employed to encourage readers to resist a “seductive, and singular voice” (153). This ironic mode of reading is introduced by the “Notice” that precedes Huck’s narrative and that cautions readers in suitably hyperbolic fashion to regard the text suspiciously rather than impose their expectations of didacticism: “persons attempting to find a Moral in [this narrative] will be banished.” Huck might be revealed to display a stronger sense of honor than many other characters within the novel, but Twain still demands that his readers reject this potential role model by instead requiring them to become knowing in a way Huck never does.

The identification fallacy that haunts studies of children’s literature, and of which Nikolajeva despairs in her titular essay of 2010, is impossible to rely upon when approaching texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Treasure Island* because either the reader or an older narrator’s subject position imprisons the young male protagonist deep within the fictional narrative. This recognition of rupture suggests a fresh appraisal of the genre of adventure fiction is needed, one that exposes the mis-reading implied when these late nineteenth-century texts are used as models for actual boys by organizations like the Boy Scouts. Robert Baden-Powell’s manual of 1908 suggests that novels, including Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* and Kipling’s *Kim*, can “show what valuable work a boy scout could do” (19), thus inviting the child to imitate, rather than actively engage with, a text’s tropes. This response was exactly that Maria and Richard Edgeworth, theorizing what a *Practical Education* might be, assumed was provoked by adventure fiction in the late eighteenth century: they feared that a “boy, who at seven years old, longs to be Robinson Crusoe, or Sinbad the sailor, may at seventeen, retain the same taste for adventure and enterprise” (292). The Edgeworths were anxious to inculcate habits tending toward “the sober perseverance necessary to success” (291) while Baden-Powell’s primary agenda was that of “character training,” particularly in developing a patriotic citizenry (Warren). Thus,

although adventure fiction was increasingly regarded as able to reinforce, rather than threaten, the dominant social order, commentators appear to agree on the genre's ability, whether threatening or welcome, to mold the goals and behavior of real boys. However, by considering how the narrative strategies of Stevenson and Twain resemble that of Aldrich's fictionalized memoir, I propose that using the broader generic term of "boyhood elegy" may allow us to recognize these texts as far from instructive: more specifically, as fantasies that acknowledge, or invite the acknowledgment of, the insurmountable distance between reader and narrator, a distance that transforms what might appear as a desire for a rose-tinted past self into a recognition of the boy as the fictitious product of a dangerous nostalgia.

My approach thus accounts for what Nodelman has described as "The Stability of the Other" ("The Other" 31), the depiction of childhood as a universal and ahistorical state, but also suggests how real children might contend with the "image of the child inside the book" that appears to try to "secure the child who is outside the book" (Rose 2). In her influential 1984 study, *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose argues that textual depictions of children function as coercive models. This possibility was certainly exploited: novels like *The Story of a Bad Boy* were adopted as prescriptive school texts in order to "revive" the "boyish activities" that were claimed to have "flourished spontaneously in a previous age" (Jacobson 12) and the earliest textbooks of child psychiatry drew on literary examples when they emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁹ Baden-Powell's 1912 training manual for girl guides, co-authored with his sister, Agnes, illustrates the problematic ends to which such coercion might be used when directed toward either gender: the handbook was entitled *How Girls Can Help Build Up the Empire* (Warren). However, Rose's fear that children's books "command" children "to recognize themselves in the first-person pronoun and cohere themselves to the accepted register of words and signs" (141) is countered by the far stronger susceptibility to ironic reading of overtly first-person narratives of boyhood from the latter part of the nineteenth century.

A resistant reading, for example, is invited by the prominent irony in Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, published episodically from 1898 to 1899. Gubar has noted how Nesbit "unmasks the child narrator as an adult construction" (*Artful Dodgers* 144) and Nesbit's first-person narrator, Oswald Bastable, provides a damning example that highlights how figures of the child are mediated, appropriated, performed, and ultimately fictionalized. The very transparency of Oswald as a narrative construction asks his readers to regard him as the idea rather than the embodiment of a boy. In the opening chapter of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, although the narrator tells his readers that one of the Bastable children "tells this story — but I shall not tell you

which. . . . While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't" (2; ch. 1), the identity of the narrator is almost immediately evident. Confirmation is given by a shift from first- to third-person narration that reveals the continuity between "I" and "Oswald." After Dora has mentioned a pickpocketing incident, the narrator comments: "I must say I don't think she need have said that, especially before the little ones—for it was when I was only four. But Oswald was not going to let her see he cared" (5; ch. 1). In the last chapter, this elision is reversed in a far more compressed fashion: "when [H.O.] complained about his head Oswald told him whose fault it was, because I am older than he is, and it is my duty to show him where he is wrong" (126; ch. 16). Such moments continually demonstrate the unreliability of the narrator, and we are invited to doubt his high estimation of Oswald's character throughout the narrative.

The Bastable children are able to navigate literary conventions expertly, immediately interpreting the declaration of Albert-next-door's uncle—"Ye have my leave to depart"—as an instruction to "bunk" because this family friend and writer has made sure they have read their Kipling (116; ch. 14). Trusting the child reader's similar expertise, the naïve perspective of Nesbit's narrator exists to be contradicted by knowing and amused readers. It is key to note that the layers of irony are multiple in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. The pretense of impartial narration veils the boy narrator's personal involvement in the tale he narrates, apparently using irony to collapse the distance between the narrating and the experiencing subject. Yet the author of these tales was advertised by Pall Mall Magazine as "Miss E. NISBET, the well known poetess" ("Editorial Notice"), and she includes a female poet who writes in the voice of a boy as a character in the novel. Both the female poet's and the Bastable sisters' ability to enact and describe what have been labeled as boyish narratives reveal Oswald's assumptions about gendered behavior to be constructed rather than essential. The inclusion of an avatar for Nesbit—who "didn't talk a bit like a real lady, but more like a jolly sort of grown-up boy in a dress and hat" (27; ch. 4)—echoes Oswald's narrative strategy of presenting the writing subject as an object to be written. While this may hold forth the promise of uncovering authenticity, this possibility is foreclosed by the duality of perspective in which a character-narrator forever revolves around the axis of the term's connecting hyphen.¹⁰ Gubar describes Nesbit's endorsement of "cross-colonization" in which "the child, as well as the adult, can appropriate and exploit texts" (*Artful Dodgers* 148). I propose that such an invitation to the child to become a collaborator in the creation of the text can function to remove the child from the foreground of the narrative. Thus the real child, in contrast to the fictive Oswald who has been "shaped by adult scripts" (Gubar, *Artful Dodgers* 143), does not become enclosed

within the text through imitating and identifying with fictional characters but is instead required by the irony of the narrative to remain outside the text and behind the scenes.¹¹

Even when boys grow up, as Jim Hawkins does, their subjectivity as writers remains inaccessible through adult-authored texts. Boys continually recede from the grasp of the reader in the texts I have examined. Nodelman bemoans his suspicion of this absence in children's literature, describing childhood as "an imaginative construct of the adult mind" that "blind[s] us" to both "our actual perceptions of contemporary children" and "our memories of our actual past experiences" ("The Other" 33). I have repeatedly concluded that first-person narratives of boyhood published between 1865 and 1900 are elegiac, placing an image and an idea of boyhood into the past, but this absence of real boys in such narratives is not necessarily coercive if we acknowledge the more complex reading strategies invited by their authors. The impossibility of childhood in children's literature is an impossibility of which Stevenson, Twain, and Nesbit were highly aware but which, I propose, functions in their texts to create the space of possibility for children beyond the text.

The inclusion of a boy narrator authored by a woman in my discussion begs the question of gender, and I propose that it is necessarily adventurous *boys* who are featured in the elegiac children's novels of the late nineteenth century. Nesbit dedicates *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* to her contemporary, Oswald Barron, "in memory of childhoods identical but for the accidents of time and space." Similarly, Twain originally intended to include a dedication "*To the Once Boys & Girls* who comraded with me in the morning of time & the youth of antiquity" (qtd. in Fischer and Salamo, "Introduction" 696). These dedications suggest the communicability of childhood across apparent geographical and historical boundaries, including the experiential boundary of gender. Although both boys and girls undoubtedly have constituted the readers of these books, it is the figure of the boy who has far more cultural resonance as a representative of a lost state. For instance, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) demonstrates the differing cultural attitude toward lost girlhood by rejoicing in the March sisters' growth into adulthood as a narrative of emancipation rather than loss. Historically speaking, we can account for this gendered difference by noting, as Jacobson does, the discontent with late nineteenth-century life primarily experienced by men who then wished to recapture their apparently idyllic youth (6–7). Melissa F. Zeiger has argued that elegies have often been perceived as "heroic male narratives of renunciation" (4) but that later nineteenth-century poets like Swinburne began to reclaim

the feminine rejection of consolation in favor of continued grief. I suggest that we can see a similar shift in the development of the genre of boyhood elegy in which the adult male attempts to sustain the existence of the boy through writing in his voice. This apparent act of resurrection functions to provide a mythic origin for the adult man, experiencing vulnerability in the face of modernizing forces, in order to bolster his increasingly fragile state as the standard upon which society is founded.

It has not only been during this period, however, that masculinity has been perceived as the normative state, and boyhood as a natural phenomenon of independence and mischief. Both are thus particularly susceptible to any challenge to assumedly universal ideas. Nodelman relates anecdotes from his teaching experience that suggest this effort to reveal masculinity as a social construct still needs to be undertaken today (“Making Boys Appear” 3) and I would add that the explicit fictionality of nineteenth-century constructions of boyhood is yet to be fully recognized. Considering Twain’s parodic presentation of Tom Sawyer as the ultimate product of imitative reading practices, it was amusing, if frustrating, to discover that the 2012 Vintage Classics edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes instructions on how to “[b]e the leader of your own gang . . . and impress your friends with hard-to-crack codes.” It seems as though texts about boyhoods have chosen an apparently unassailable, and thus necessary to be assailed, cultural construction to expose. These texts might be regarded as asserting gendered forms of behavior when they are subject to imitative reading practices, but, as I have argued, actually call such assumptions about masculinity into question through their ironic narrative techniques.

An alternate historical argument about the significance of gender has been made by Catherine Robson: she claims that the feminization of childhood in the nineteenth century ensured that “little girls represent[ed] . . . an adult male’s best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self” (3). Robson explains that the innocence of girls was “discussed and legislated out of existence” in the 1880s and 1890s, leading to the boy’s ability to “embody a new image of childhood for a new age” (15). Thus the turn to boys in the latter part of the nineteenth century led to the construction of a lost state that had never existed for many writers, despite the autobiographical claims of many contemporary and more recent readings that emphasize the relationship of such adventure narratives to autobiography and memoir. The sense of nostalgia as “sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of” an earlier time and self dates from 1900 (“Nostalgia”). While the novels produced in the immediately previous decades laid the groundwork for this “sentimental imagining or evocation,” their authors were always—and, indeed, demanded that their readers be—aware of its dangerous potential to assert fundamen-

tally false images of boyhood. The nostalgia evident in boyhood elegies such as *Treasure Island* derives its true pain from the nonexistence of the adventurous boy as well as the cruelty of those who wish to impose him as a model upon real children. Rather than the restorative nostalgia that Svetlana Boym describes, a nostalgia that “manifests itself in total reconstruction of monuments of the past” (41), and thus drives elegiac and imitative reading practices, we are instead offered “reflective nostalgia” with its “ironic and humorous” acknowledgment that nostalgia is always “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (49; xiii).

In the final poem of Stevenson’s 1895 collection, *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, the child playing in the garden of the book—a text in which many poems are offered in the voice of a child—is described as “far, far away” and impossible to “be lured out” (136).¹² The final four lines of the poem acknowledge that time is the source of this distance and inaccessibility as the child exists in memory only: “He” is “a child of air” (137), formed by the breath of nurses reading to their charges as—we learn from the volume’s dedication—Stevenson’s nurse did. Especially if we identify the boy of the poem with Stevenson, who died after a period of ill health before the book appeared in print, it might appear that the boy has receded from embodiment to textual materiality, becoming enclosed in the book. Yet late nineteenth-century adventure fiction for children is hunting for treasure buried in the past, treasure that can never be found because the act of seeking was all that ever gave it existence. Like the dreaming Peter Pan, such narratives are “in pursuit of a boy who was never here, nor anywhere” (135): a boy who is only ever to be found in a storybook.

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Notes

¹I am grateful to Victoria Ford Smith and Clare Costley King’oo for their thoughtful suggestions as I drafted and revised this essay.

²Cohn writes that these terms, originally *erzählendes Ich* (“the narrating self”) and *erlebendes Ich* (“the experiencing self”), have “been adopted by most critics concerned with first-person narration” (298).

³ Kennedy derives this pair of terms from Christopher S. Noble, who has argued, for example, that Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold undertook nation-building work in their elegies.

⁴ My analysis of this illustration is indebted to Laura Kasson Fiss, specifically her observation that illustrations in childhood texts can “literalize . . . the metaphor of reading as immersive . . . calling attention to the mechanism of immersive reading” in order to “paradoxically break . . . the illusion” (258).

⁵ For a wider discussion of the ongoing collaborations between Stevenson and Osbourne, see Ford Smith.

⁶ In “My First Book,” Stevenson claims this was a later insight: he professes that he was unaware of his significant debts to other writers, including Daniel Defoe, Edgar Allen Poe, and Washington Irving, while composing his novel. See Pierce for a detailed examination of the initial publication context of *Treasure Island*.

⁷ For further details, see Krauth 166–208.

⁸ All quotations from the text are taken from Fischer and Salamo’s edition.

⁹ Sally Shuttleworth notes, for example, that it was the Tulliver siblings in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* who allowed Leonard Guthrie to devise “diagnostic categories” (3) such as “the neurotic and unemotional temperament” (18).

¹⁰ This doubling of perspectives is foregrounded by the Bastable children’s later re-appearance in Nesbit’s adult fiction. For an engaging debate on Nesbit’s “cross-writing,” see Briggs, Rothwell, and Reimer.

¹¹ Karín Lesnik-Oberstein offers a useful corrective when she asks whether “‘agency’ and ‘voice’” are “necessarily, the liberation from adult exploitation and oppression that critics such as Gubar would claim” (9). The texts under consideration in this essay, however, complicate the question by exposing the lack of agency experienced by child narrators and projecting the agency of child readers as formed through resistance to such voices.

¹² In her reading of the poem, Fiss describes its conception of the book as “not a malleable mirror but an impenetrable window” (271).

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