Gilles Deleuze asks, in *The Logic of Sense*, “how much must one pay in order to be able to speak?” (236). This question resonates with the primary issues of the preceding chapters: we are linguistically isolated until we pay the price of conforming to standards of development, which continue to cost us, as in order to gain a voice in one context we commit ourselves to the prelimited range of ideologies expressible in that context (embedded and transmitted through language) at the expense of others. When we gain a voice we silence others. There is no truly egalitarian dialogue where linguistic power is enacted, only the ideal of more enlightened listening.

Deconstructing misleading dichotomies of Western childhood discourses is only a beginning; the field of childhood studies needs to make a constant effort to decenter the unearned authority of adulthood itself. The spaces silenced in the process of legitimating discourse enclose potential for resistance and disrupting from within that goes unsuspected because of our own exclusionary biases. If in vigilantly deconstructing our age-biased discourse about children we can only reconstruct them, at least we should do so with respect for the potential resistances built into that discourse for those excluded from it.

P. L. Travers’s *Mary Poppins* (1934) indulges in such an empowering reconstruction (and indulges us in the fantasy of a dialogue with it) when we eavesdrop on the “conversation” of two infants, a bird, the sunshine, and Mary Poppins. Barbara is confused by the way adults speak around her, and John explains, “It’s only the idiotic way they have of talking.[ . . . ] I don’t believe I’ll ever understand Grown-ups. They all seem so stupid” (138). They deride their older brother and sister, Michael and Jane Banks,
for not understanding their own communication, or that of the starling and the wind. But Mary Poppins shocks them with the news that Michael and Jane once understood as well as the infants do now. The starling expounds: “You’ll forget [too] because you just can’t help it. There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one—at the very latest—except, of course, Her” (140). Mary Poppins is the adult version of Peter Pan—a gatekeeper to a magic space inaccessible to other adults. She is, as the starling explains, “the Great Exception,” the embodied dream of adult anti-rationalist nostalgia. She is also the exception who reaffirms the rule that language creates a gradually receding barrier that surrounds and defines childhood. This receding linguistic barrier is perhaps the most commonly embedded distinction in definitions of “childhood”—any dictionary will remind you that “infant” comes from the Latin and French for “not yet speaking.”

In this chapter I will look back on many of the texts already discussed in earlier chapters, along with some fresh examples, to consider more closely children’s discursive agency in them. Though disallowed engagement by lack of necessary language skills or willing (able?) adult listeners, literary children are frequently idealized as sites of resistance to the inflexible, systematizing logic of adult discourse. Anti-rationalist nostalgia casts child-figures as excluded from adult discourse but advantaged by their outside position. Such figures illustrate possibilities for passive resistance in disrupting rather than engaging adults on the level of their own discursive trappings.

All of the techniques we have seen for isolating and imagining access to those we call children pivot around a perceived language barrier. Mary Galbraith has described this problem in terms of experience: “Experience may be always already saturated with language, but language is always already saturated with experience” (“Hear My Cry” 193). In other words, linguistically indoctrinated subjects are more likely to carry the biases their language has available for making sense of their experiences, whereas less socialized subjects will be less saturated with the built-in biases of a language, necessarily depending less upon it to categorize and communicate their experience. Their lack of linguistic ability, therefore, could be seen as a cognitive (empathic) strength (inaccessible, of course, to adults). But adult discourse occludes recognition of that potential strength. Children are continually dismissed as irrational, crude, and prelogical when they have not yet mastered the means (language) to communicate any disproof of these assumptions.

The apparently insurmountable self-interest of adult discourse and
power is limited to consciousness expressed in terms of rationalist logic, as Daniel Dennett has granted: “The preeminent work of consciousness is dependent on sophisticated language-using activities” (qtd. in Sheets-Johnstone 251). He, like most academics, assumes that linguistic sophistication is a necessary condition for worthy conscious thought when, in fact, it might merely be a limited means for expressing it. This oversight in the works of Piaget and other developmentalists has come to be recognized as a flaw by progressive child psychologists, yet in literary study we often bow to the logo-determinism that still pervades post-structuralist theory and discursive analyses in cultural studies. Cathy Urwin traces the linguistic isolation of children through this critical tradition:

One of the most frequent debates focuses on the relative importance of nature versus nurture, inbuilt as opposed to environmental factors, or other versions of this familiar see-saw. Representing a particularly clear example of the individual-social dualism . . . at the core of this view of development is an implicitly or explicitly assumed unitary subject which knows and exists outside of, or prior to, its entry into the social world. This assumption is particularly evident in the study of language development, where there is a marked if not universal tendency to view language as an object outside the child. (264)

Only when children begin using language that we comprehend do we tend to acknowledge them as language users (no matter how much Roman Jakobson dignified babbling). Questions of language acquisition seem to provide the critical axis around which theory can pivot (in the case of linguistically relativistic theories like those of Kristeva and Vygotsky) or take root (as in rationalist accounts such as Piaget’s and Chomsky’s). But Urwin indicates a common tradition among them all—a tendency to dichotomize the self as individual or social, preverbal or speaking.

Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud’s “Fort-Da” analysis spotlights this threshold: “the moment in which desire becomes human is that in which the child is born into language” (103). This manner of defining dismisses the identity of a preverbal infant almost as sharply as recapitulation dismisses its humanity. Michel Foucault’s model of discursive power (in knowledge) is sometimes seen as sharing this bias because knowledge depends upon language, which confines thought. He writes, in The Order of Things, “The grammatical arrangements of a language are the a priori of what can be expressed in it. The truth of discourse is caught up in the trap of philology” (297). If we acknowledge that language is a flawed vehicle for
“truth” and knowledge, we must consider the implications of this “trap” for the study of children. Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers provide a rubric: “Applying analytics of textuality [ . . . ] to children/childhood is to argue that whenever we see or recognize, portray or represent a child (or children or childhood in general), we do so at one remove. Spoken or written, the child in text is a child ‘in other words’: a child already worked upon, a child re-presented—‘a word child’ (187). All we can do in discourse is deal with word children, but that does not mean that all young subjects placed by discourse into a position of “childhood” are solely and absolutely determined by (or even accessible through) our words.

In recognizing the constructedness of identity through language, contemporary scholarship and theory respectfully keep their analytical focus at the level of language, yet for this reason theorists usually ignore the potential of asystematic verbalization and nonverbal consciousness. Lev Vygotsky wrote against this bias, as Alex Kozulin explains in his introduction to Thought and Language: “A child’s development knows pre-intellectual speech as well as nonverbal thought” (xxxii). Certainly the trend of teaching pre-speaking babies sign language suggests that infants are linguistically capable before they have the phonetic mastery necessary for recognized speech—only the tools, not the intelligence, necessary for communication are missing. Even if we tolerate a logo-determinist bias, we at least have to recognize that nonspeaking infants have communicable thought earlier than generally acknowledged, and that such a state or means to accessing that thought is highly relative and indefinable.

Presenting herself from the rhetorically rare position of being both in and “outside of language,” autistic writer Temple Grandin exemplifies that thought is not limited to speech-ready language. Her experience reveals the extent to which our normative social practices neglect nonlinguistic cognition. In Thinking in Pictures she explains, “One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills” (19–20). Such thinkers, like nonspeaking (or linguistically inexperienced) children, can easily be overlooked as unsophisticated. (Incidentally, Piaget, D. W. Winnicott, and Vygotsky each made comparisons of autistic thought to early developmental stages in pre-speaking children.) For nonautistics she articulates her thought processes in terms that she admits are rarely translatable:

Autistics have problems learning things that cannot be thought about in pictures. The easiest words for an autistic child to learn are nouns, because
they directly relate to pictures. When I read, I translate written words into color movies or I simply store a photo of the written page to be read later. When I am unable to convert text to pictures, it is usually because the text has no concrete meaning. Growing up, I learned to convert abstract ideas into pictures as a way to understand them.

Her description shows that her primary epistemological mode is visual, not verbal. And although she is forced to adapt verbally to communicate, Temple Grandin uses her advantage as a “visual thinker” to excel where “language-based thinkers” cannot.

“Visual thinkers,” or any thinkers independent from verbal composition and articulation, can be seen as having an unnoticed advantage over those who depend upon normalized methods and do not recognize alternatives. Feral children have often been idealized as embodying this epistemologically independent space, which might explain the seeming correlation between cultural interest in feral children and revolution (in France, for example, there was great intellectual fervor over the “wild boy” Victor d’Aveyron in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and in Germany, over foundling Kaspar Hauser in the first quarter of the nineteenth). Feral children, representing pre-social alinguistic experience into much later ages than socialized kids, have been found throughout history (undoubtedly existing in greater numbers before they got such attention) but were not always the target of media focus and intellectual fantasizing. Research on feral children frequently crosses over with that of autism. In fact, in two of the more famous cases, those of Victor d’Aveyron and Kaspar Hauser, it is hypothesized that the boys were severely and mildly autistic, respectively—whether as a cause or effect of their abandonment is unknown. Both became the subjects of critically acclaimed films, also at a time of cultural revolution, the 1970s.

Despite occasional cultural curiosity about thinking from outside of conditioned reason enabled by lack of linguistic experience, Western discourse, especially in the United States, seems steeped in disregarding possible thought outside of language. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone states directly how this bias limits our constructing of childhood: “The infant or child in our culture is typically undervalued because it does not speak; only adults speak. In turn, an infant or child does not know; only adults know. Until a child accedes to language, it has no value” (243). If we equate speaking with knowing, we risk ignoring the consciousness of young people who are yet to work or still working their way into language. Perhaps such a position
cannot be voiced, but its potential (and the limited domain of adult discourse) should be recognized and respected.

The inaccessibility of the pre-articulatable mind is key to Julia Kristeva's conception of early development: "The impossibility that beset [sic] ... an attempt at gaining access to childhood" stems from the condition that "the real stakes of a discourse on childhood within Western thought involve a confrontation between thought and what it is not, a wandering at the limits of the thinkable" (276). That which is thinkable without language is supposedly unthinkable to adults. But authors who legitimate a childhood silenced by our discourse often suggest that what is inexpressible in discourse may be thinkable to those outside of it. Toni Morrison foregrounds this challenge in *Beloved* (1987) when she asks through her title ghost-child-character: "How can I say things that are pictures?" (210). Dramatizing a mental process like that Grandin has described, Morrison preserves that which is thinkable at the borders of language and beyond with images, turning her inaccessible child-character into a visual, not verbal thinker.

Beloved, the ghost of a baby who died seventeen years prior to her reappearance, returns in the body of a young woman but is characterized as an unsocialized child who must learn not only how to talk but also walk and use a toilet. (In an interview with A. S. Byatt, Morrison refers to her as having an “eight-year-old mind.”) Morrison recognizes the impossibility of speaking as a child—she even addressed this issue in the afterword to her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in which she describes narrating as children an “attempt to shape a silence while breaking it” (216). She admits that when it came to developing a voice for her ghost-child, Beloved, she had writer's block for three to four months: “You only have those twenty-six letters in the alphabet—that's all you've got. [...] I couldn't get Beloved's language, which means I couldn't see the way she would see things” (interview). Eventually Morrison exploited the power of image to create a credible ghostly-childhood position: “Her voice is all image—all picture. [...] Everything she says is a picture, how it looked, how it was, or how it smelled. There's no sort of ramification or descriptive thought in between—no judgment” (interview). Syntax and punctuation are disrupted to break any sense of sequence. What results is not an empowered voice as legitimated discourse would recognize it, but a collage of images that might reflect the vast space Beloved represents. Beloved says (thinks), “There is no place where I stop” (210). The images that float throughout her montage are fragmented views of a slave ship, her mother, flowers, song, and disease—in short, collective memory. Like James's
Maisie, Beloved is limitless in what she can reflect. Morrison respects the impossible inaccessibility of her child character (complicated also by her deathliness), yet in her portrait she provides an original twist on traditional approaches to that inaccessibility, inviting us to imagine what one outside of discourse might see.

Morrison confronts and circumvents the imposition of representing a child linguistically through her reliance on image. She is particularly sensitive to the exclusionary and domineering effects of language use because she is already focusing on socially marginalized characters. As Lynda Koolish says, “Images are crucial in [Beloved] because Morrison writes of a people bereft of language” (422). Morrison situates authority on the side of language and sympathizes with the other side. In her afterword to The Bluest Eye (1970), she writes of Pecola’s voicelessness: “Since the victim does not have the vocabulary to understand the violence or its context, gullible, vulnerable girlfriends, looking back as the knowing adults they pretended to be in the beginning, would have to do that for her, and would have to fill those silences with their own reflective lives” (214). In order to avoid imposing her adult view through the impossible guise of representing Pecola’s, she relies on the reconstructed childhood memories of Pecola’s friends now that they have the means of expressing them, foregrounding the adult mediation of events through memory. This device of explicitly accessing one child’s experience through the selective and unreliable memories of outsiders honorably recognizes the immediate inaccessibility of Pecola’s traumatic childhood and respects the unmediated boundaries that result.

In The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction, Barbara Wall surveys other techniques writers use to represent and address children in light of more everyday language barriers. (The challenge therein already evidenced by the infrequent use of children as self-narrators before the second half of the twentieth century—Huck Finn being the most notable exception.) In literature for children, some authors seem to have applied Henry James’s method by experimenting with narrative immediacy. Wall credits Ivan Southall with modifying free indirect discourse into the present tense for children’s prose: “In Josh (1971), for which he won the Carnegie Medal, the use of the present participle instead of a finite verb dominates the narration, and enables the writer to gain an immediacy which suggests not only that events are happening at the moment at which they are read, but also the fragmentary nature of Josh’s imperfect understanding of what is going on” (250). In the adult canon, Alison Lurie’s Only Children (1979) experiments with different levels of immediacy to a simi-
lar effect when articulating Lolly’s thoughts. For example, in the pastoral passage discussed earlier, Lurie not only uses free indirect discourse, she reduces verbs simply to the present participle for a greater sense of immediacy: “Virginia loving Anna’s house, surrounding it holding it hugging it safe forever. Green-veined soft hands, hundreds of them” (41). Like Morrison’s Beloved, Lurie’s child-centers, Mary Ann and Lolly, break conventions of syntax and mechanics to desophisticate the language so that it appears less mediated. Like Travers’s infant Barbara, Lurie’s child-centers are mystified and shut out from the secrets of adult speech. Lolly considers language dangerous: “Panties, that are safe named and clean and folded in the bottom drawer, suddenly falls apart: into aunties, a word for aunts that aren’t real aunts; into pant, ants, pants, words that are safe by themselves, but they can come together and make you sick. […] No words are safe” (151).

In empowered adult discourse, words are weapons, but they are weapons that can be turned against their users. This is demonstrated repeatedly in the silenced subversive space cut out for children in literature. One excluded from discourse can disrupt it without necessary awareness of contextual meaning, formal logic, or even grammar, as E. B. White’s Charlotte illustrates by weaving words that Templeton collects from garbage labels in her web to save Wilbur’s life in Charlotte’s Web (1952).

Authors who struggle to represent children and stop short at the language barrier often deconstruct the assumptions that back adult discourse with unwarranted power in order to pinpoint its vulnerability. White does this by stripping the words, as mentioned above, of contextual meaning and clear syntactic function in the spider’s web, but he also decenters the power-context in which words are used. Fern’s mother visits Dr. Dorian for advice on her daughter’s apparent delusion that she can understand the farmyard animals speaking. Dr. Dorian not only lays bare adult prejudice but also exposes the falsely centered power of Mrs. Arable’s viewpoint: “It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn’t catch the remark because I wasn’t paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman’s barn talk, I’m quite ready to believe her. Perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more” (110). Though he is talking about animals, he incorporates a hint about children as well—his subtext reads: perhaps if adults listened, children would have more voice. White is drawing attention to the one-sided nature of adult discourse, showing that adults disregard as unreal what they do not see or understand.

As a convention in childhood literature, talking to animals often effects
this point. For example, in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), the idealized child of nature, Dickon, could speak robin (which is a quite distinct language not to be mistaken for any other). To speak robin to a robin is like speaking French to a Frenchman. Dickon always spoke it to the robin himself, so the queer gibberish he used when he spoke to humans did not matter in the least. The robin thought he spoke this gibberish to them because they were not intelligent enough to understand feathered speech. (274)

In “The Power of Speech: Life in the Secret Garden,” Claudia Marquis claims that “Language is here the site of infantile development and the medium of recuperation. [. . .] Language is equally the locus of an ideological display of male power” (169). I see the discursive power in this novel as more aged than gendered, but Marquis has fittingly described an important theme in literature representing children. Exclusive language predicates power but also initiates the limiting mechanisms of ideology. Like the Banks infants in *Mary Poppins*, the robin is excluded from human talk and so assumes it is unintelligent and unimportant. This dismissal draws attention to the flipside fact—that adults make the same easy assumptions about children’s language or lack thereof.

Even when the one we define as a child is gaining proficiency in language and attempts to engage adult discourse, the tendency in adults is to be skewed by their own constructions of the innocent, or ignorant, child rather than listening to his/her actual import. In “Is Anybody Out There Listening?” Maria Tatar argues, “Children can indeed raise their voices, but virtually no one bothers to listen” (276). We may say “that’s precocious for his age” and laugh, or simply ask, “where did she get that?” without once recognizing that we have positioned things worth saying elsewhere through our own prejudice.

E. B. White illustrates the absurdity of our logocentrism the first time Charlotte weaves words in her web. Led by her text, not her action, the onlookers read, gasp, and repeat, “Some Pig” with unreflective awe. In a following conversation between the Zuckermans, White points to the irony of the situation. Mr. Zuckerman insists there has been a miracle, “and we have no ordinary pig.” Mrs. Zuckerman replies, “It seems to me we have no ordinary spider” (80). This moment of insight is eclipsed, however, when for the rest of the novel she and other adults obediently repeat and accept without question Charlotte’s simple web-words and never again question how they got there.

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White has provided a literary enactment and mockery of the logode
terminism that has become a defining premise of post-structuralist theory:
language structures thought, thus, we are able to perceive only that which
our language allows us to think. It is this limiting effect in the language of
presumed power that gives the discursively disempowered a vantage point.
Accordingly, many authors endow their own word-children with extradis-
cursive power. Again, the definitive example comes from Lewis Carroll,
when Alice, defending the Cheshire cat, tells the King of Hearts, “A cat
may look at a king” (114). The elusive cat’s semi-invisibility is not unlike
the cloak of invisibility provided children when overlooked. Alice’s imper-
atives might lack the weight of the King’s orders, but at the center of
power, like adults, the King is exposed to penetrating eyes. Observation is
sufficient fuel for subversion. The young, inexperienced, or even semi-
invisible cat-subject has the opportunity to question based on what he/she
sees, unburdened by systematized thinking—that is the advantage those
empowered yet limited by legitimated discourses overlook, creating a blind
spot that makes us even more vulnerable to probing eyes and ears.

Childhood potential for spying is the central premise of Louise
Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy* (1964). Harriet spies on Mrs. Plumber, a
wealthy, spoiled woman on her “spy route,” by hiding in the dumbwaiter in
her home. Harriet writes in her journal, “RICH PEOPLE ARE BORING. [
. . . ] IF I HAD A DUMBWAITER I WOULD LOOK IN IT ALL THE
TIME TO SEE IF ANYBODY WAS IN IT” (45). The passage humorously
reminds an adult reader of how easy such spying must be for smaller per-
sons, because larger people overlook the spaces they cannot occupy them-

The freedom of being overlooked makes child figures popular social
critics (thus the success of poster children). In Ernst Bloch’s vision of a
Marxian utopia, childhood can harbor gentle revolution, particularly
because of a child’s potential for hiding, seeing unseen, and speaking from
a silenced space: “Here too the fun of being invisible ourselves. We seek out
a corner, it protects and conceals. . . . The hidden boy is also breaking out,
in a shy way. He is searching for what is far away, even though he shuts
himself in, it is just that in breaking free he has girded himself round and
round with walls” (22–23).

The discursive space children occupy is bound but easily overlooked,
which draws many to interpret children’s literature, likewise carefully cat-
egorized and kept in its place, as a subversive genre. As Tim Morris points
out, “Juvenilizing children's books and genre fiction alike serves to repress concerns of great importance, relegating them to a land of children's literature where nothing is really taken seriously—and therefore where almost anything can be said, the privilege of both child and courtly fool” (6). Authors for and about children often indulge in this freedom vicariously. Unsuspected and overlooked, literary children demonstrate the ability to upset adult authority through honest observation and thinking from outside of established language and logic (or the common “sense” against which nonsense is defined). The psychologist in Henry Kuttner’s “Mimsy Were the Borogoves” (1943) warns accordingly: “Children are different from the mature animal because they think in another way. We can more or less easily pierce the pretenses they set up—but they can do the same to us. Ruthlessly a child can destroy the pretenses of an adult. Iconoclasm is their prerogative” (Padgett 74).

Disruption can occur simply by a child turning the tables. Consider Fern's plea to Mr. Arable to keep Wilbur as a pet: “The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?” (3). Or the dose of your own medicine, as in Peter Pan (1911), when Mr. Darling persuades his son, “Michael, when I was your age I took medicine without a murmur. I said ‘Thank you, kind parents, for giving me bottles to make me well’” (16). Innocently (?), Wendy finds the bottle and gives her father some to take in order to set a cooperative example for his son. Mr. Darling complains that “it isn’t fair,” and Wendy reminds him, “I thought you took it quite easily, father” (17). Her comment exposes that her father’s power comes not from sounder reason but from the fact that he is an adult and he “says so.”

These disruptions often characterize adult thought as rusty and ideologically constraining. In Theodore Sturgeon’s “Baby Is Three” (1953), for example, Gerry realizes that his gestalt self (described in chapter 4) is threatened by the imposition of Miss Kew’s power as adult caretaker: “We all woke up at the same time. We all did what somebody else wanted. We lived through a day someone else’s way, thinking someone else’s thoughts, saying other people’s words” (99). Again, the vehicle of her control comes down to language. And it is clear that unlike the paranormal gestalt unit formed by Gerry and the other children, Miss Kew, as a grown-up, is blinded by her own systematized thought. When a display of their paranormal powers threatens her sense of reality, she simply denies what she sees: “[The twins] could pop from one place to another right in front of Miss Kew’s eyes and she wouldn’t believe what she saw” (93). When they defend themselves against Miss Kew’s attempts to break up the unit by
sending Baby away, they communicate telepathically and fight on their own terms: “We’d tried our best to be good according to her ideas, but, by God, that time she went too far. She got the treatment from the second she slammed her door on us. She had a big china pot under her bed, and it rose up in the air and smashed through her dresser mirror. Then one of the drawers in the dresser slid open and a glove came out of it and smacked her in the face” (95). Their means of communicating their needs and intent is non-verbal, which Miss Kew can then rationalize away, explaining, “Something struck the house. An airplane. Perhaps there was an earthquake” (95). Like the Banks infants, the children who make up the gestalt self have their own means of communication but are misunderstood by those who would have power over them. When the kids tell Miss Kew that Baby is happy with them, she retorts, “As if he could talk, the poor little thing!” (94). She cannot understand their voiced needs because she accepts her own reasoning over what she observes (rationalism again). As her denial robs them of a means of engaging in a productive and fair debate with her to promote their preservation, Gerry finds no alternative but to kill her.

Rationalist discourse in particular seems to force disruption from without more than within—those who devalue reason are discredited easily as irrational, making it more difficult to legitimate a break. This is demonstrated in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), when a professor tests Kaspar’s ability to reason by presenting him with a version of the Epirmenides paradox. The professor tells Kaspar that there is a village of liars and a village of people who only tell the truth, and Kaspar must divine which of the two someone comes from: “In order to solve this problem logically, there is only one question, and only one. What is the question?” The “one question” the professor seeks from Kaspar is to ask if the person is from the village of liars, whereby through a double negative a liar will be revealed. Kaspar, however, comes up with a different question: “I should ask the man if he is a tree frog.” The professor’s response exposes the rigid limits of the professor’s abstract system of reason: “I cannot accept that. [ . . . ] There’s no other question by the laws of logic. [ . . . ] In logic we do not understand things; we reason and deduce them.” Kaspar, who thinks with little training on his own to a less complexly reasoned but more practical solution, successfully debunks the professor’s rationalism and mocks the blind spots in understanding caused by trusting systematized reason over intuition or simple observation. The scene also demonstrates the ways in which more experience with language and logic can tie us up with impractical particulars, losing sight of the not so easily categorized reality
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around us, confusing the systematization of thought and its expression with knowledge itself.

In *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), a particularly apt example (pertaining to language barriers) occurs when the Scarecrow and Jack Pumpkinhead recruit a child, Jellia Jamb, to be their interpreter. Developing a theme common to Baum, on the blind adherence to ideas in light of their obvious ridiculousness, adult figures rationally follow through with faulty premises to demonstrate the foolishness of trusting reason over observation. The Scarecrow and Jack assume, because they come from different countries, that they speak different languages. This they discuss, clearly understanding one another, deciding to have Jellia interpret for them. Overlooking the obvious fact that they are communicating directly, they depend upon Jellia's account of what each is saying, but Jellia mocks them by misinterpreting their remarks to each other as insults, thrusting their folly in their faces. When Jellia finally tells them that they are speaking the same language, Jack takes the blame for assuming their difference. The Scarecrow returns, “This should be a warning to you never to think” (52). But they are “thinking” based on abstract presumptions rather than common sense. Baum demonstrates the inadequacies of rationalism in comparison to empiricism: there is danger in valuing the singular consistency of logic over the constant multiplicity of possible observations.

What Louise K. Barnett has said of Huck Finn's experience applies here: “Public language is committed to a priori positions which often require a falsification of experience” (221). Baum exaggerates the adult-figures' dependence upon (pre)systematized thought to indicate Jellia's fortunate isolation and freedom from it. To Baum, the cause and means of ideological deception is language, another example being in the willingness of Emerald City's inhabitants to wear green glasses. In *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) the wizard explains to Dorothy that it is all done in the service of naming: “I thought, as the country was so green and beautiful, I would call it the Emerald City, and to make the name fit better I put green spectacles on all the people, so that everything they saw was green” (161).

The wizard “makes the name fit,” seeming to fit reality to his ideas, but he also uses language to disguise reality on falsely centered authority. In literature for and/or about children, adults are frequently heard using language arbitrarily to fit their interests. Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty (a seeming caricature of age with his bald, round shape) tells Alice, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (269). This arbitrarily applied subjective authority is not much of a stretch from that which Lolly Zimmern responds to in her elders in *Only Children.*
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She ponders the unpredictability of their meaning: “Things are suddenly called a different name that makes them change invisibly and be smeared with invisible dirt. [. . . ] Or other times the word holds still and the thing changes behind it and some ordinary word is wrong and awful” (149–50). Mary Ann appreciates her teacher Anna as an exception: “When you talk to Anna she looks at you instead of at things behind you like most grown-ups” (22). Both Lolly and Mary Ann are aware of the slippage in meanings “behind” words and that this slippage is contextually dependent on adult desires and perceptions.

Often child characters disrupt discourse by turning adults’ presumption of power and linguistic bullying back on them. Dorothy rhetorically disrupts the Wizard’s bullying, when he demands that she and her friends kill the Wicked Witch of the West in order to earn his gifts, by flinging his own words back on him: “If you, who are Great and Terrible, cannot kill her yourself, how do you expect me to do it?” (110). She exposes his hypocrisy and decenters his power by reminding him of her presumed lack of power.

This decentering of power and disruption of discourse became the trademark of Louise Fitzhugh’s Harriet, who takes up the weaponry of words to cultivate her independent selfhood and to provide a ready defense. Her parents worry that she writes too much, which is not surprising considering that Harriet’s use of the language constitutes a kind of passive resistance toward (or escape from) the influence of their words. Their fears resemble nineteenth-century parental concerns about corruption from books that I discussed in chapter 4. Both seem to reflect a desire to control child access to and use of literate knowledge and, thus, power. In this light, Harriet is a successful subversive, as J. D. Stahl indicates: “Louise Fitzhugh creates a child who appropriates adult forms of literacy and transforms them to suit her purposes” (120).

Her parents suspiciously eye her journal, but they fail to directly address Harriet, who writes, “WHY DON’T THEY SAY WHAT THEY MEAN?” (171). The novel follows her struggles with straightforward language against the confusing layers of meaning surrounding her. In her writing she is frank and uncensored, as Miss Golly has advised her to be. But when her classmates steal her journal and read it aloud for all her peers to hear, they are hurt and desert her. Betrayed by her own words, she turns for advice to the following lines from Golly’s letter:

Naturally those notebooks should not be read by anyone else, but if they are then, Harriet, you are going to have to do two things, and you don’t like either of them:
In such examples, the power of language lies in the power to deceive. By lying Harriet will learn an important skill in negotiating her interests and better intentions more successfully. Fitzhugh arms her child-character with a growing knowledge of how to use words in her own defense.

The lying child is a literary representative of the romantic philosophy that language itself is unavoidably deceitful (or a “prison-house,” to Wordsworth). The most famous example is, of course, Huck Finn. Unlike Harriet Welsch and Lolly Zimmern, who wish to decode and counter the deception “behind” adult talk, Huck’s skill in lying seems possible because of his rejection of the social codes preset “behind” language itself. Louise K. Barnett describes Huck as a “linguistic outsider” for this reason: “Huck lacks the veneration of socially prescribed labels ordinarily acquired through acculturation. In society’s view he is aberrant because he sees the activity without the social meaning which an official label provides” (222). According to this description, he uses words simply without attention to meanings “behind” them. His rejection of social contextualization constitutes subversive self-empowerment—for example, he disembodies the “conscience” that haunts him from its usage in a wider racist context, developing his interpretation of what “conscience” means (66). He succeeds because he thinks outside of the prescribed meanings of his own culture’s language (as the definitive American romantic child, so he can enact this seemingly impossible ideal of independent interpretation).

One of the most common techniques of subversion in literature for and about children does this to an extreme. Hyperliteralism strips phrases of their contextually dependent meaning, thereby enabling a disruption of normative control over interpretation. For example, in Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* (1868) the title character uses figurative phrases in a literal sense to divert attention from his homelessness and fashion himself as successful. When Dick jokes with a shoeshine customer about his lodgings the man asks, “So your house is on Fifth Avenue, is it?” (5). Dick responds, “It isn’t anywhere else,” which, of course, is literally true but evasively denies the more common meaning of the phrase. When Mr. Whitney mentions that Dick’s face is dirty, he replies, “They didn’t have no wash-bowls at the hotel where I stopped. [. . . ] The Box Hotel” (21). In fact, he has slept in a box, but his joke briefly, literally masks the truth. Alger seems to use this device simply for humor, or at most to indicate that Dick is self-conscious about his untidy homelessness. But more often hyperliteralisms point to a
child’s exclusion from language by misinterpreting phrases that, like jargon and euphemism, seem to say something different from what they mean.

Alison Lurie makes this especially clear in Only Children. When Bill Hubbard’s job is threatened by a depressed economy, he assures his family that he won’t lose his job, but “his office might get smaller” (18). His daughter, Mary Ann, sensibly asks, “How could it get smaller?” She imagines the room shrinking. In the slippage that causes such miscommunications the dependency of meaning on context is revealed. When she tries to make sense of her parents’ language, she incorporates what she is learning of their contexts in the definition: “They are agnostics, which means they think God probably doesn’t exist but they are too polite to say so to people who believe he does” (158).

The reader most keenly feels Mary Ann’s exclusion from the language of adult business. When she overhears her father mentioning that he has been asked to sit on the school board, she “wants to ask what board, and why Anna wants Bill to sit on a board at Eastwind, [ . . . ] but she decides to wait till later. If she says anything now they’ll remember she is there and know she is listening” (246). Lurie demonstrates the literally confusing and contextually dependent meanings likely to occur in unmastered language, as well as a child’s exclusion from understanding them and resulting awareness of the silent space cut out for spying.

Edith Wharton uses the same device to show how literal misunderstandings can seem threatening to the uninitiated. In The Children (1928) Beechy and Bun’s biological mother boasts, “When Astorre and Beatrice come to live with me the first thing I shall do is to make them both cooperate” (255). Beechy (Beatrice) embraces her brother Bun (Astorre): “‘No—no, you bad wicked woman, you musn’t! You shan’t operate on Bun, only on me—if you must!’” Ironically, Beechy’s misunderstanding foregrounds that their mother is threatening an invasion of another sort—she is eager to experiment with child-rearing strategies she has learned from (yet again) child psychology.

Some literary children resist such mental meddling and refute adult constructions. They are constructed as understanding and resenting adult constructions of themselves, showing that “age” itself is a context of empowered speech. Wharton’s primary theme in The Children is the difficulty of defining children (for her, this difficulty especially relates to sexual knowledge, and her tale reads like a subtle prototype for Lolita). The main child figure, Judith Wheater, has an ambiguous role in society: she is prepubescent and unworldly, but she is also the chief caretaker of her many younger siblings, which forces her into difficult decision-making and
responsibility. When she explains to Martin Boyne, her self-appointed
guardian, that her mother is fond of her tutor, Martin is scandalized
because he considers this a blunt revelation of Judith's knowledge about
her mother's sexual improprieties. However, the extent of her understand-
ing is unclear. Even so, Martin, always pressing to preserve an image of her
innocence, says angrily: “You've said something exceedingly silly. Some-
ing I should hate to hear if you were grown up. But at your age it's merely
silly, and doesn't matter.” Her response reveals her resentment of his
stereotyping and disrespect for her opinion: “My age? My age? What do
you know about my age? I'm as old as your grandmother. I'm as old as the
hills. I suppose you think I oughtn't say things like that about mother—but
what am I to do, when they're true, and there's no one but you that I can
say them to?” (59). Though aware of her chronologically defined age, she
is expressing to Martin that such measures inaccurately reflect what they
aim to—they are relative at best. Like Maisie, she's learned that “age” is a
culturally defined and ever-shifting concept. Judith's experience demands
that she behave responsibly, “like an adult,” so she perceives how socially
constructed the concept of “old” can be. She also refuses to let Martin strip
her words of their weight by adding a false context—her “innocence.”

Jean Baudrillard idealizes the resulting potential for subversion from
such an ambiguously perceived position: “The child has a double strategy.
He has the possibility of offering himself as object, protected, recognized,
destined as a child to the pedagogical function; and at the same time he is
fighting on equal terms. At some level the child knows that he is not a
child, but the adult does not know that. That is the secret” (Baudrillard
Live 111). Judith knows that the identity adults impose upon her is an
inadequate and simplistic representation of her true experience and
responsibility. She resists Martin's presumptions (not to mention his veiled
sexual advances), taking refuge in her position as a protected “object.” Her
question, “What am I to do?”—one that is repeated in many variations
throughout childhood literature—reveals that she is using the only power
allowed her in the given context by invoking her marginalized status. She
forces him to consider the opportunity he affords her for more adult con-
versation but reminds him of the relative helplessness of her condition.

Others, as Baudrillard suggests, more aggressively take advantage of
adult blind spots. British Bildungsromane set a precedent for American lit-
erary children in this category. In Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), Mr.
Brocklehurst comes to interview the young Jane, who has been labeled a
liar and cast off by her Aunt Reed to Brocklehurst's school, Lowood. He
tells Jane that the wicked go to hell and asks, “What must you do to avoid
Chapter 5

...it?” (25). Jane elusively replies, “I must keep in good health, and not die” (26). She refuses to play into his simplistic construction of the innocent child and mindlessly repeat his fed doctrine. Further pressing her reform, Brocklehurst quizzes her knowledge of the Bible. She admits a preference for “Revelations, and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis, and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah,” but her claim that “Psalms are not interesting” challenges Brocklehurst’s expectations for malleable children, so he can only react in a negative and infantilizing manner: “Oh, Shocking! I have a little boy, younger than you, who knows six Psalms by heart: and when you ask him which he would rather have, a ginger-bread-nut to eat, or a verse of a Psalm to learn, he says: ‘Oh! the verse of a Psalm! angels sing Psalms,’ says he; ‘I wish to be a little angel here below.’ He then gets two nuts in recompense for this infant piety” (26). Charlotte Brontë is satirizing the use of rote learning and revealing that Brocklehurst is probably being duped by his son. It would seem logical that this “pious infant” plays the role because he knows he can get twice as many cookies that way. Why not be “a little angel” if as a “protected object” one is safer and spoiled? Imposing innocence reinforces such a masquerade.

Brontë’s passage reveals three important things about relationships between adults and those constructed as children: first, that adults are naïve in imposing a state of innocence/ignorance on children, who for all they know may have something very intelligent to say or a critical insight or question to be acknowledged; second, that in imposing our own limited constructions of childhood we encourage hypocrisy in children; third, that even the “pure” child who appears to follow the rules can act subversively in his/her own interest.

Adult-child relations are complex in their constant redepictions of vulnerability and power, dependence and subversion. The child psychologist in “Mimsy Were the Borogoves” puts it this way: “Children are helplessly dependent on the caprice of those who give them birth and feed and clothe them. And tyrannize. The young animal does not resent that benevolent tyranny, for it is an essential part of nature. He is, however, an individualist, and maintains his integrity by a subtle, passive fight” (Padgett 74). Subversive literary children maintain the fight through a passive (and unknowing?) resistance enabled by overlooked loopholes in the oppressive logic of adult discourse.

Both Judith Wheater and Jane Eyre, in the examples above, seem to resent and resist the constructions that adults would pin on them. Resistant efforts are particularly strong when children must defend themselves...
the “benevolent tyrants” who care for them. Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is one of the most estranged child-figures I know of in the American canon (except Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*), and she serves as an early precursor to modern child rebels. Within the society in which she lives all are hostile and condemn her mother. As a “child of sin,” she is not spared their antagonism. When the Governor threatens to take Pearl away from Hester, a local minister is called in to “examine” the love-child. He asks Pearl, “Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?” (134). Her reaction, like Jane’s above, challenges the discourse of adults present and, incidentally, the teachings of the church:

> Now Pearl knew well enough who made her; [ . . . ] But that perversity, which all children have more or less of, and of which little Pearl had a tenfold portion [ . . . ] took possession of her, and closed her lips, or impelled her to speak words amiss. After putting her finger in her mouth, with many ungracious refusals to answer good Mr. Wilson’s question, the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison door. (134)

Pearl does more than simply disrupt adult order and expectations during the examination. Aside from expressing her obvious resentment toward those in power, her response, ironically, draws attention away from the contentious issue of her creation that continually punishes her mother. She not only defends her own dignity but her mother’s as well. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) Topsy evades the same issue by saying, “Never was born!” (356). Both examples echo the subversive effect of Hans’s version of Hanna’s creation and reinforce Freud’s theory that the most universal deception children first experience and continue to resent is being lied to about their own conception with unsatisfying, evasive mythologies.

> The most effective way to disrupt adult discourse and yet be sheltered by the imposed guise of innocence is in the form of a question. It is an assumed natural right of children to ask questions, for questions hasten learning and can be seen (by those who need it) as respecting authority. Pearl demonstrates such subversive power through her questions that she effects change and demands justice in the events of the narrative that influence all of the main characters. It is Pearl, not her mother, who makes the greatest strides toward forcing Dimmesdale’s confession and uniting her parents. When the two plan to steal away together and live as a family with Pearl, the girl asks, “Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three

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together, into the town?” (228). She insists, in her own subtle ways, on vindicating her mother’s honor by forcing Dimmesdale’s honesty. It is not enough for him to accept her as a daughter; he must first endure what Hester has and be socially recognized as her father. She overtly refuses him any voluntary sign of affection until he climbs the scaffold in public and invites Hester and Pearl to join him (229). Dimmesdale seems to have been led by a need for Pearl’s approval, and when he has confessed, he asks her, “Dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now? Thou wouldst not yonder, in the forest! But now thou wilt?” (268). That she does finally kiss him at this moment confirms the rightfulness of his decision, and “a spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies [ . . . ]” (268).

Pearl functions in the novel much more complexly than stock redemptive child-characters, such as Eva in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. She is often the cause of her mother’s pain and aggravates her mother’s effort to protect her. She is described as dangerous and otherworldly, frequently signified by her incomprehensible language. When taunted by local children she throws stones at them, making “shrill, incoherent exclamations” that seem to be “witch’s anathemas in some unknown tongue” (117–18). When she is angry at Dimmesdale’s failure to come forward, she tricks him into close attention as if to answer a question: “Pearl mumbled something into his ear, that sounded, indeed, like human language, but was only such gibberish as children may be heard amusing themselves with, by the hour together. [. . . ] The elfish child then laughed aloud” (176). Here she disrupts his attempt to get information with elusive language, but she makes clear that he is being punished for his own lack of forthrightness: “Thou wast not bold!—Thou wast not true!” (176). Her consistent role in these scenes is critical and subversive, not simply redemptive. She is the only character in the novel with the freedom to be an individualist.

Pearl is an idealization of the subversive potential of being overlooked and silenced within legitimated discursive spaces—through her Hawthorne articulates a critique of hypocrisy and power. But the silenced subversive discursive space is truly ineffable, at least to those of us empowered by discourse. That does not change the fact that we create such an opportunity for subversion by enacting power in discourse—an unprovable reality that Lindsay Camp nonetheless demonstrates in his picture book, Why? (1998), illustrated by Tony Ross.

In it, Lily incessantly asks the question that she is entitled, from a position of unknowing, to ask: “Why?” Her father sometimes gets frustrated
realizing how infinitely deep her rounds of questioning can go—until a Thargon spaceship lands practically at their feet, and the aliens threaten to destroy the planet (figure 6). Lily asks them why:

ALIEN: WHY? Because that is our mission, of course.
LILY: Why?
ALIEN: Because destroying puny planets brings glory to the mighty Thargon Empire.
LILY: Why?
ALIEN: Because . . . well, because our Great Leader, the Imperial Tharg, says so.
LILY: Why?
ALIEN: Because . . . he just does, Small Female Earthling, he just does. Hmm.

Once Lily has opened up a dialogue the Thargons look critically at their own rhetoric, deciding to leave and rethink their leader’s plans: “Your questions show disrespect to our great leader. However, we realise destroying planets hasn’t done us much good.”

Did Lily just deconstruct Thargon imperialism in one word? Such a swift breakdown might be idealistic, but Camp’s point is concrete: legitimate discourse is empowered by the silences that prevent its self-deconstruction by constant questioning. Every time we get to a point where we have to say that someone “says so,” we have exposed the reliance of our truths upon subjective authority—authority whose centering of power we must question. Camp’s book demonstrates the great potential of unknowing. Attempting to think from such a position (recognizing and homing in on what we do not know, asking questions, and listening more as a means of understanding) of self-aware unknowing, we might come to more fairly recognize those we silence and are silenced by.

Questioning from a position of unknowing protects the discursive child from accountability and forces empowered speakers to lay bare their own reasoning to the point of exposing the centering of that context’s discursive power. It is no wonder, then, that so many authors have used child-characters to “voice” their social criticisms. Rebel child-figures are often paired with marginalized underdogs in order to help reflect their struggles for justice. In fact, children seem to be the only primary characters (usually middle- to upper-class) to befriend servants in the British tradition from Jane Eyre to the Harry Potter series, a tendency that is Americanized to include enslaved and exploited laborers and domestic workers in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the Wizard of Oz series, The Secret Garden, Pollyanna, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Harriet the Spy.

Eleanor Porter’s title character in Pollyanna (1913), in particular, is a vehicle for criticizing the idle rich and their methods of “charity.” She innocently asks her aunt if she has ever received a barrel of donated clothes from the church and is quickly reminded by her aunt’s displeasure that her aunt would have no need: “I forgot. Rich folks never have to have them. But you see sometimes I kind of forget that you are rich—up here in this
room, you know” (46). Innocently she draws attention to the poor condition of her own attic room, but “rich” takes on an ironic meaning as well, hinting that her aunt’s life is not so plentiful in activity and friends. Her comments have the effect of not only illustrating a common theme, that money alone does not bring happiness, but also, in the form of an apology, criticizing her aunt’s lack of generosity.

Porter’s narrator always stresses that such criticisms are unintentional on Pollyanna’s part. For example, in the passage above, she was “plainly unaware that she had said anything in the least unpleasant” (46). When Pollyanna overhears the Ladies’ Aid group arguing over their decreased fund for missionaries in India, Pollyanna’s criticism is phrased, much as the questions above, as confusion: “It sounded almost as if they did not care at all what the money did, so long as the sum opposite the name of their society in a certain ‘report’ ‘headed the list’—and of course that could not be what they meant at all!” (93). However, Pollyanna knows the consequences of the women’s narrow-minded charity and public vanity. She dreads having to tell her own charity cause, the street orphan Jimmy Bean, that “they would rather send all their money to bring up the little India boys than to save out enough to bring up one little boy in their own town, for which they would not get ‘a bit of credit in the report,’ according to the tall lady who wore spectacles” (93). Pollyanna eventually finds a home for Jimmy Bean, and as if that is not enough, she manages to reunite her aunt with a former lover in the mix. Porter makes it clear that her motif on the necessity of “a child’s presence” is more than sentimental—in the small fictive world of Pollyanna, a child can be redeemer of the rich and Robin Hood to the poor.

Like other authors discussed here, Porter reminds us that though her child character affects change, she is excluded from adult discourse and only indirectly or unknowingly doing so. When she pleads Jimmy’s case to Mr. Pendleton, she reveals that she has misunderstood Nancy’s comment that Pendleton has “a skeleton in his closet”: “Maybe you think a nice live little boy wouldn’t be better than that old dead skeleton you keep somewhere. But I think it would!” (154). Without revealing his secrets or explaining Nancy’s figurative meaning, Pendleton agrees to see Jimmy. At her most influential moment, Pollyanna is excluded from understanding the contextual meaning that determines her influence on Pendleton, as he admits: “I know that a ‘nice live little boy’ would be far better than—my skeleton in the closet. Only—we aren’t always willing to make the exchange. We are apt to still cling to—our skeletons” (154–55). It is clear that he means more in this statement than he assumes she knows. But his realization also carries the anti-developmental sentiment that adults get
rusty in their thought, along with the flipside notion that children are free thinkers, because they are excluded from adult discourse and power, outside of which they can think and act subversively.

Scout, in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), effects even more dramatic disruption and turn of events yet, like Pollyanna, seems free of accountability for her influence. She demonstrates the literary child’s propensity to ask many questions early on. When she asks her Uncle Jack what a “whore-lady” is, he dodges her question, but her father, Atticus, warns him, “Jack! When a child asks you something, answer him, for goodness’ sake. But don’t make a production of it. Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults” (87). Atticus is aware of the power in simple questions, and Scout asks plenty. The climactic scene of the novel (even more so in the film) revolves around this fact. Atticus, who is surrounded and threatened by a white mob for protecting a prisoner (Tom Robinson) they want to lynch, tells his son Jem to take Scout home. One man from the mob grabs Jem to hurry him along, and Scout defends her brother from him: “I kicked the man swiftly. Barefooted, I was surprised to see him fall back in real pain. I intended to kick his shin, but aimed too high” (152). She is ignorant of her reasons for triumphing here but triumphs all the same. More astonishing is the effect of her questions once she recognizes a familiar face among the mob: “Hey, Mr. Cunningham. How’s your entailment gettin’ along?” (153). A slew of her innocent questions silences the crowd: “Don’t you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? [ . . . ] I go to school with Walter [ . . . ] He’s your boy, ain’t he? Ain’t he, sir? [ . . . ] Tell him hey for me, won’t you?” (154–55). Oblivious to the danger her father and his client are in, she acts just politely enough to shame the mob into retreating. Her presumed innocence protects her from the anger of the mob, but her questions remind them of their own culpability.

In a penetrating moment of social criticism, Scout asks Jem about racist comments she’s overheard: “How can you hate Hitler so bad an’ then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home—” (247). Such questions, and the indirect disruptions cited above, expose contradictions in adult discourse. What Susan Stewart has written of nonsense applies here: “When a fiction concomitantly presents two domains of reality as the set of voices in conflict with one another, irony results. In irony the text begins to demonstrate the relative nature of provinces of meaning” (20). Recognizing relative meaning destabilizes rationalism, of which a fundamental tenet is that truth is found and upheld through noncontradiction. Antirationalist constructions of childhood indulge in moments of forced contradiction in order to dismantle this absolutism. They force awareness of
the relativity of meaning and systems of meaning (ideology), idealizing a childhood free of the trappings of socialized subjectivity.

This and preceding chapters have demonstrated various uses of hyperliteralism, dramatic irony, "innocent" questions, and paradox to indicate word-children's estrangement from, misunderstanding of, and potential to disrupt adult discourse. When we recognize adult power we must also recognize the power to resist it. As Foucault suggests in "The Subject of Power," this resistance might be purely intellectual or even unintentional: "The relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot [. . .] be separated. The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?)" (790). Empowered discourse imposes and enforces varied constructions upon children—but that does not mean that subjects are powerless to reject, subvert, or even ignore the constructing.

Mikhail Bakhtin has written that “every act of world history was accompanied by a laughing chorus” (474). Writers for and about children have turned to their subject often as part of that laughing chorus, critiquing and healing more legitimated, “serious” forms of discourse associated with the adult world of consequential action. Creating a space in which to laugh at ourselves as hyper-rational adults or to fancy ourselves children, we reveal more about our language, anxiety, and desire than we do about the youth they target. That attempts at portraying childhood tend toward anti-rationalism is not surprising when thrown in the light of Western history. Kristeva writes, in *Desire in Language*, “Western reason perceived that its role of being servant to meaning was imprisoning. Wishing to escape, it turned toward and became haunted by childhood. [. . .] [A]nalytic discourse was given a privileged foil, a nexus of life and language (of species and society)—the child” (271). Adulthood, born of the age of reason, its ensuing literacy and empowerment of knowledge, is accompanied in response by the concept of childhood as unreasoning, speechless, and disempowered; but in the latter position we imagine a freedom from what Foucault might call the danger of abstraction. In *Madness and Civilization* he explains the connection between childhood and madness (both developed as negative contrasts in the Age of Reason), and he argues that insisting upon noncontradiction can become obsessive and isolating:

If the progress of knowledge dissipates error, it also has the effect of propagating a taste and even a mania for study; the life of the library, abstract speculations, the perpetual agitation of the mind without the exercise of
the body, can have the most disastrous effects. [. . .] Knowledge thus forms around feeling a milieu of abstract relationships where man risks losing the physical happiness in which his relation to the world is usually established. (217–18)

This unhappiness is demonstrated in chapter 3 by characters like Colin from *The Secret Garden* and Gurlie in *White Mule*. It is also the unhappiness that Boo Radley avoids in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like other holy simpletons (Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool,” Jerzy Kosinski’s Chance in *Being There*, and Forrest Gump) he resembles a child-figure. Excluded from the adult social reality of Maycomb, his medium is silence and irony. Jem, who is older than Scout and more jaded by the trial, wrongful conviction, and murder of Tom Robinson, reveals this when, at one point, he contradicts Scout’s optimism about equality: “If there’s just one kind of folks, why can’t they all get along with each other? [. . .] I think I’m beginning to understand why Boo Radley’s stayed shut up in the house all this time . . . it’s because he wants to stay inside” (227). By rejecting education and society, Boo Radley is trying to escape adulthood, much as authors and their readers may desire when idealizing childhood, escaping frustrations through nostalgic indulgence.

I quoted Eric S. Rabkin earlier as saying that “regression may be a balm for the disappointed,” relating such nostalgia to the burdens of language and abstract thought (11). If we believe, as Western rationalism teaches, that the highest truth is only knowable through reason, then the burden of knowledge is entirely upon us as individuals seeking answers in our minds with limited reference to empirical proofs. The burden of rationalism is therefore great, and through nostalgic constructions of childhood it is vicariously lightened. In fictional realms where children initiate change and force recognition of relativity, we can believe, briefly, in an unthinkingly totalized “ever after.” But we must check ourselves from taking advantage of the inaccessibility of childhood by imposing an impossible notion of innocence to nostalgically soothe away the very complex responsibilities we in turn deflect onto children without giving them credit to control or room to differ.

Developmentalism laid the paradigmatic groundwork for a family épitémé in which adult power over children is ideologically inherent, locking in a paradoxical disclaimer against any dissention or radical questioning from within (and thus, by ideological means). Those of us falsely empowered (adults) within this épitémé are the very subjects who must alter our thought. If we could only accept the impossibility of reterritori-
alizing childhood, molding children, and appropriating child culture, then we might stop expecting our constructions of childhood to materialize and start learning from the ideals we are projecting through them instead. By following the example of our own anti-rationalist idealizations of childhood as an intuitively primed position of unknowing receptivity, we might be more primed, ourselves, for self-criticism and engaging in more self-conscious, self-revising discourse.

Claudia Castañeda points out that what is required of us is to rethink not only children but also the actual ways we define the knowledge we use to center power and delegate authority:

The newborn’s existence cannot be known fully by adults because that existence is the effect of an agency that is excessive to adult knowledge (though perhaps not to our experience). [. . .] To re-theorize the subject in terms that do not make use of the child as the adult’s presubjective other means establishing an un-knowing—the impossibility of total knowledge and of a total claim on the real—that is the condition of knowledge itself. (168)

If we embrace our inability to know childhood, and even empirically accept limitations to our understanding posed by a dependence upon language, we might find a different kind of empowerment in a position of unknowing and, likewise, encourage those less socialized and linguistically limited than ourselves (whom some will call children) to open questioning and ongoing discovery.