

# Transgression vs the Politically Correct: Phases and Faces of a Core Category in Children's Literature

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It seems that in recent years criticism has been eagerly focusing on 'transgression' and 'transgressive' as keywords that enlarge the epistemic horizon, allowing the scholar's gaze to descry areas previously untouched, or explored with a different cultural bias. In the literary domain, as an intentional act that involves trespassing, and the breaking of rules performed in explicit ways, transgression is often linked to language and form, and also to questions of gender, politics, social behaviour. The following articles, while dwelling on transgression, locate it within the area of children's fiction, thus operating a first preliminary transgression, inasmuch as this kind of literature has been traditionally moulded by the romantic and pastoral fallacy of childhood as an innocent, untainted, happy condition, and, in turn, by the Victorian cult of the child that thrived on aesthetically idealized representations of childhood and youth, teeming with sound moral principles, healthy didacticism, excellent examples of virtue.<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that children's literature does also include texts that foreground children intent on disobedience and mischief, such as *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), *Max und Moritz* (1865), *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870), *A Bad Boy's Diary* (1880), *The Wouldbegoods* (1901), *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca* (1912), to quote a few titles: books whose

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<sup>1</sup> Fairy tales, not considered here, are not exempt from the stigma of bad behaviour (see Bottigheimer 1989).

content and protagonists are so distinct from the traditional fare for young readers as to constitute a genre apart, the 'bad boy story'.<sup>2</sup> With a few exceptions, however, these stories end up with the punishment, repentance and reformation of the bad boy, thus acquiring the mood of cautionary tales. This has to do with another element of complexity, namely the adult lurking within the text as author, or figure of power, slyly directing the reader's response and expectations: Jacqueline Rose (1984) has alerted the critics on the point, which, in our case, throws a suspicious light on transgression and its unavoidable limit, as described by Michel Foucault:

[t]ransgression is an action which involves the limit [...]. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess. (Foucault 1980, 33-4)

In the 1990s, Alison Lurie's pioneering work, *Not in Front of the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1991), examined texts for children that were *not* of the improving kind: Lurie used the category of subversion as the tool meant to reveal not only the children's quest for freedom, knowledge, power, but also the hidden adult inhabiting their texts with his/her ideology, his/her moral lessons, and the more-or-less explicit fears and desires adults impart to the young generations:

[t]here exists in our world an unusual, partly savage tribe, ancient and widely distributed, yet until recently little studied by anthropologists or historians. All of us were at one time members of this tribe: we knew its customs, manners, and rituals, its folklore and sacred texts. I refer, of course, to children. The sacred texts of childhood, however, are not always the ones adults recommend. (Lurie 1991, ix)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In children's literature also animal stories may endorse the transgressive attitude: see Beatrix Potter's stories of Peter Rabbit, a disobedient young rabbit, of Tom Kitten, and the mischievous Squirrel Nutkin; also Kenneth Grahame's character of Mr Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) provides a good instance of transgressive behaviour.

<sup>3</sup> Robyn McCallum and John Stephens (2010) have also investigated the role of adults in moulding children's literature.

What Lurie did with her book, delving into the area of subversion (itself a subtler form of transgression), also inspired the conference on *Transgression vs the Politically Correct in Children's Literature* held in 2019 at Milan State University, and the articles included in this journal. By contrasting the ambiguous yet constricting mantra of the 'politically correct' against 'transgression', the project sought to stimulate research on a category that, according to Peter Hunt, sums up *the heart of the conflicts* in children's literature.<sup>4</sup> Can children's books ever be truly transgressive when the power-structure that produces them is always bent on educating children into the current politically-correct norm? Indeed, however transgressive the books for young readers might be, they are at best in tension with the politically-correct publishing/author/adult complex, and at worst controlled or permitted - like carnival or Saturnalia.

The limits imposed on transgression have been pointed out by John Stephens in his seminal *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), which examines the presence of principles and rules impinging on childhood, either as explicit beliefs expounded by the author, or as implicit passive notions endorsed by a writer, or as the ideology inherent in language itself. Stephens is also aware that the study of ideology inhabiting the text could be of interest to scholars who refer to reader-response theory. In fact, bringing to the fore the implicit reader in children's literature was a strategy meant to show the gap between the child reader and the author presiding over the text in even greater detail and often in dramatic conflict.

The authors who offer their contributions to the present collection have at once described the act of transgression and, more cogently, the uncertain territory where transgression is met by its limit, the politically correct, whether it be the net of language with its countless shades, omissions, ironies, uses and misuses, or the social prescriptions that write the agenda of rules for the young. The very ambiguity of the politically correct, its much-debated history in our recent culture, has increased the tension, possibly even the conflict, between a 'political correctness' related to language and placing its limit on unusable words, and the plea of those who defend freedom of expression and brand the politically correct policy as a superficial form of moralism (Hughes 2011).

In "Forbidden Words: Language Control and Victorian Political Correctness in Dickens and Carroll", Galia Benziman examines Victorian patterns of censorship and self-censorship in Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Lewis Carroll's Alice books (1865; 1871). Her study goes back to Maria Edgeworth's campaign against fantasy books, and

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Peter Hunt for attending and chairing the conference and offering these valuable and illuminating remarks on the subject.

then dwells on Victorian educational rules that involved language control. Dickens – elsewhere a staunch defender of fairy tales – exposed the explicit means of coercion used by adults, parents and teachers, to thwart the child's imagination and creativity, and to mould the obedient and hard-working citizen of the future. The school of Coketown is the place where the teacher – ironically, Mr Choa-kumchild – has devised a lexicon where numbers replace names, and where the empathic and knowledgeable description of a horse is replaced by an arid formula taken from a manual of zoology. Dickens's depiction of schools, classrooms, and teachers, was never brimming with praise, as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* show. Yet *Hard Times* sets an even sharper focus on classroom didactics, especially when the Lancaster's monitorial system for the education of poor children, adopted in industrial districts, comes into the picture. Language control, self-censorship and verbal training were part of the Victorian-era politically-correct discourse. Benziman's epigraph, a quote from Orwell's *1984* defining that novel's "Newspeak", suggests that the sinister power attached to language control, when vocabulary is impoverished and sterilized, also extends to the control of minds and bodies. She argues, with Slavoj Žižek (2019), that "Political Correctness Is a More Dangerous Form of Totalitarianism". Benziman's essay also examines the Alice books, especially *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), where the educational system, manners, rank and race are duly satirized: "[a]s one may expect from an Oxford Don, the most thoroughly satirical attacks [...] are directed at education" (Lurie 1991, 23).

However, political correctness was not only a staple of Victorian education. Deborah Lévy-Bertherat, in "The Blue Fairy and Wendy: Incest, Sacrifice or Feminine Empowerment?" finely examines the very subtle transgressive innuendos attached to two young female figures in children's fiction, namely the blue Fairy in *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883) by Carlo Collodi, and Wendy in James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, first staged in 1904, and published as *Peter and Wendy* in 1911. Both described as girls, both acting as surrogate mothers, the blue Fairy and Wendy inhabit an ambiguous territory, where the child is also an adult mother figure. As such, empowered in their maternal role, they challenge gender hierarchy, and question the hero's responsibility and masculinity. Transgression appears in the form of incestuous desire, infantile sexuality and, in the case of the Peter Pan play, homoeroticism, Peter's role being played by an actress. The so-called Golden Age of children's literature contained, after inspection, much material that was just gilded. Lévy-Bertherat then moves to discuss the Disney adaptations of those two classics, where, predictably, Disneyfication did 'correct' all the aspects that made them questionable. Transgression was quenched by Disney's animated musical fantasies *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Peter Pan* (1953), which advocated

order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood and whatever sounded transgressive in the motherly figures of blue Fairy and Wendy. Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) apparently mitigate gender stereotypes – a gesture towards the politically correct of recent years – but the disturbing ambivalence of the girls disappears in favour of more univocal characters.

Based on the analysis of a French novel that can be classed as young adult fiction, the article by Sylvie Servoise acknowledges the painstaking, dramatic tensions and pitfalls endangering the life of a young fourteen-year old boy when his family, with its parental figures, offers no certainties and no hopes for the future. Her article on “The Politically Incorrect and Its Limits in Late Twentieth-Century Youth Literature: *Rome, l'Enfer* (1995) by Malika Ferdjoukh” reflects on the contours and limits of the unstable notion of ‘political correctness’ in a novel for adolescents deprived of a happy ending, and which shocked many readers at the time of its publication. Servoise argues that *Rome, l'Enfer* is in more than one way a politically incorrect novel. The elements that Servoise disentangles within this text are above all the pessimistic view of the human condition tainting the boy's story in the context of a gloomy description of contemporary French society. The representation of social violence within a kind of descent-into-hell progression – Rome is the name of a Paris metro station – details the hellish journey through unknown and dangerous parts of Paris by night, which ends with the boy's death in a rubbish dump. Overarching these aspects with a kind of metanarrative effect there is the author's confutation of one of the most solid staples in children's education and literature, namely the edifying and beneficial role of literature and of the knowledge offered by books. Henry's bookish culture does not help him in the urban jungle where even the slang spoken by other boys sounds to him incomprehensible: in this sense the novel endorses what can be seen as the politically incorrect, insofar as reading and learning from books have always been recommended as means of improvement of the child's ignorant condition. But Servoise detects ulterior elements that portend a vision of society that can be associated with the ‘politically correct’ stance: the satire of middle-class mores and manners is there, as also the ethnic differentiation that concentrates the negative attitudes on the novel's white characters. On this slippery, ambiguous terrain, books and literature in general can be beneficial only when, instead of inducing painless dreams of Eden, they foster experience and promote the ability to judge in young readers.

With Beatrice Moja's article on “Children's Sexualisation and Toys: Barbie Doll as a Sexual Token in Sarah Strohmeyer's *Barbie Unbound*” the theme of sexuality and its configuration in adults and children is broached. This is one of the issues that transgression, since Foucault, has most frequently challenged inasmuch as adult

writers and readers usually repress the relationship of children with sexuality, to favour the stereotypical, socially and communally acceptable perception they have of themselves. Not so with a very popular toy, the Barbie doll, endowed with a sexy adult body, and with an environment of glossy wealth and trendy pink fashion. Yet, in the book *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession* (1997), enriched by the realistic photos by Geoff Hansen, the famous doll is used as a medium to discuss sexual issues. The adventures of Barbie doll in different contexts - whether historical, as the avatar of famous figures like Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette or Marie Curie, or as the victim of violence in a contemporary world - do not fail to raise cogent questions about political correctness, whenever the reader is alerted to the real dangers that surround and affect the apparently paradisiac adolescent world where Barbie lives in thoughtless hedonism. The fact that Strohmeier's book addresses a crossover readership stimulates a dialogue between transgression and political correctness that Moja has analysed pointing out the inevitable tensions arising from the subject. The experiences met by Barbie are violent and dangerous, especially when sex is involved: rape, harassment, unwanted pregnancies, abortion, venereal diseases, race and gender identity and discrimination, are so many events that mark the life of this unconventional Barbie, and are discussed in the appendix to the book. Strohmeier wishes to highlight the limitations and false statements embedded in our social and cultural conventions. In this way she challenges the politically correct, even by highlighting that some apparently unpopular decisions taken by Mattel Inc., Barbie's real producer, are the result of shrewd evaluations of the financial benefits arising from the politically incorrect.

In "John Boyne's Representation of the Shoah in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Paradigm of Transgression and Linguistic Uncertainties", Marco Canani brings up once again the theme of the historical tragedy of the Shoah and the discourses - whether in the 2006 book or the 2008 movie - that attempt its representation. The search for a paradigm fit to reconcile ethic concerns with aesthetic demands in the representation of the Shoah has been the object of extensive scholarly debate. How can the Shoah arouse feelings of aesthetic pleasure in readers and spectators? Especially when the subject matter is inhuman or barbarous, the risk is to elicit a morbid, voyeuristic effect, and to bring forth a response based on feelings of tolerance and compliance.

Thus the analysis points out the unspeakable, the silences and omissions in Boyne's book, deriving from a representational uncertainty integral to the memorial transgression involved in the very writer's aim. The nine-year old Bruno, the son of a SS commander, is fed with ignorance, understatement, and uncertainty about the concentration camp that he calls "Out-With". Bruno progressively learns

about the inhuman reality of the camp, and death will be his ultimate destination. Both the novel and the movie reveal a complex interplay between transgression and the limits of representation, especially when the movie appropriates Boyne's verbal discourse, by adding the visual power of images. The twists embedded in the verbal viewpoints that can be found in the novel, the difficulty in conceptualizing the horror of the Shoah, find a different treatment within the different visual medium, adding a further degree of tension, due to the inevitable visual aesthetics governing it, to this testimonial narrative.

These five articles, with their different issues pointing out transgression in speech and children's education, in parental and gender roles, in conventional views of literature, in sexuality, in the representations of the Shoah, altogether confirm that such critical category can be illuminating, especially when in tension with the unsaid and unspeakable, which once transgressed meet the limits imposed by political correctness. The many conflicts represented in children's literature, from the eighteenth century to present day, whenever social norms, customs, stereotypes, and discourse itself are threatened by transgression, are likely to produce a different, more complex, less conventional portrait of the child reader, still subject to the subtle compromises inherent in the very use of language but not so weak and submissive, not so powerless, and not so innocent.

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