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From 'Peter Panic' to proto-Modernism: the case of J.M. Barrie

Maggie Tonkin

The author may be dead as far as Roland Barthes is concerned, but the news is yet to hit the street. Probably nothing speaks more loudly of the gap between academic literary criticism and the culture of reading outside the academy than the latter's continuing obsession with the author. Barthes's claim that the author is neither the originator nor the final determiner of textual meaning has assumed the status of orthodoxy in scholarly poetics. Whilst the early austerity has faded somewhat, such that discussion of the historical specificity of the author is no longer scorned in literary studies, the Romantic privileging of the author as the 'fully intentional, fully sentient source of the literary text, as authority for and limitation on the "proliferating" meanings of the text', as Andrew Bennett puts it (55), has never regained its former currency. Yet outside the academy, public fixation on the figure of the author has never been greater: the author is now a communal fetish.

J.M. Barrie, famed for his authorship of *Peter Pan*, is a case in point. *Peter Pan* has long been neglected within the academy, but recently the tide has turned and it has become the focus of renewed scholarly attention. However, as Peter Hollindale notes, there are 'two co-existent stories' about *Peter Pan*, 'each with the capacity to distort or confuse our understanding of the other' ('A Hundred

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Years' 199), for alongside the renewed scholarly attention to Barrie's best-known work has emerged a public fixation on his life, which is manifest in popular cultural forms such as biography, film, popular science books and websites. These depictions range from those that stick to known facts about Barrie's life to those that Hollindale dubs a 'speculative psycho-sexual cocktail' ('A Hundred Years' 201). Defamatory claims about Barrie's purported perversions multiply willy-nilly in popular culture, fed by the anxiety about paedophilia ubiquitous in the late twentieth century. Indeed, Richard Morrison has tagged the popular association of Barrie and his most famous text with paedophilia as 'Peter Panic'. The problem with this fetishisation of Barrie the author is not simply that it is largely based on unsubstantiated speculation and moral panic, but rather that it generates a mass of author-based criticism that obscures, rather than illuminates, his singularity *as an author*. In this chapter, I will scrutinise some of the allegations made about Barrie, and then change the subject from the author to the *authored*. In particular, I want to see what happens when we consider Barrie not as a subject of perversion but as a subject of literary history. When we separate the text from the life — in contradistinction to the many critics who read *Peter Pan* psycho-biographically — and situate it at the moment of its production, it becomes apparent that Barrie's most famous work ought to be considered in the light of early Modernism.

The mythology around Barrie, which rivals that of his most famous creation, has its roots in the disjunction between his highly successful public career and his unusual personal life. In public, Barrie had a relentlessly upward trajectory. Born in 1860 as the ninth child of a humble handloom weaver in rural Scotland, James Mathew Barrie gained admittance to Edinburgh University from where he graduated with a B.A. He then moved south to England where he carved out a journalistic career before becoming one of the most celebrated authors of the *fin de siècle*, writing critically and commercially successful novels and plays, and, of course, creating *Peter Pan*. Writing enabled Barrie's transformation from a lower-class Scottish outsider into a member of the British establishment: he mingled with famous artistic figures of the period; hobnobbed with royalty; became a Baronet in 1913; was awarded the Order of Merit in 1922; and was appointed Rector of St Andrews University, and later Chancellor of Edinburgh University. Furthermore, his writing earned enormous sums of

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money both during his lifetime and after his death: his bequest of the *Peter Pan* royalties to the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children has helped keep that institution afloat through the intervening century. His death in 1937 was the occasion of national mourning, with condolences sent to his family by the King and a service at St Paul's Cathedral led by the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹

Yet this public success masked a private life that included many tribulations. The first of these, which is the origin of much of the Barrie mythology, was the death of his fourteen-year-old brother David in a skating accident when Barrie was six. As Barrie recounts in his memoir of his mother, *Margaret Ogilvy*, David's death had a profound effect on the family. His mother never recovered from her grief over the death of her favourite son, and it seems that Barrie, more urgently than the six other surviving children, felt that he had to console her by assuming the role David had occupied in her affections. Margaret Ogilvy's subsequent possessiveness, and Barrie's mother-fixation, would provide a goldmine to later biographers. A later source of grief for Barrie came from the failure of his thirteen-year marriage to actress Mary Ansell. In the divorce proceedings, Ansell claimed that their marriage had never been consummated, which Barrie never publicly refuted. Barrie's failure to 'perform' Edwardian masculinity in his marriage, coupled with his unconventional interest in children, lies at the heart of many of the accusations later made about him.

Furthermore, his love of play for its own sake, indeed of games of all types, especially cricket, is yet another indication of how far at odds Barrie was with the glorification of masculinity, work and Empire that dominated the Edwardian period. Kevin Telfer's *Peter Pan's First XI: the Extraordinary Story of J.M. Barrie's Cricket Team*, gives an intriguing account of Barrie's obsession with play. Telfer argues that play, rather than winning, was Barrie's main preoccupation. Hence he ensured that his cricket team always contained a fair proportion of 'duffers' (non-skilled players, amongst whom he included himself), so that the game remained fun rather than a contest of skill. Banter, larking about, teasing, wordplay, and the construction of fanciful narratives were essential to Barrie's notion of 'playing the game'. Barrie's reverence for both games and storytelling is a manifestation of his desire to contest the devaluation of play consequent on

1 For the biographical information in this chapter I am indebted to Lisa Chaney's excellent *Hide-and-Seek with Angels: A Life of J.M. Barrie*.

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instrumental reason and the social mores of late Victorian England, and comes through strongly in his most famous text.

Finally, Barrie's deep attachment to the five sons of his friends Sylvia and Arthur Llewelyn Davies, whom he unofficially adopted and raised after the early death of their parents, was the source of both happiness and grief, since two of the boys died tragically young. Barrie publicly acknowledged that the make-believe adventures he shared with the boys were the inspiration for *Peter Pan*. What he could not have foreseen were the sinister terms in which this relationship would be depicted after his death.

During his lifetime, his literary peers showered him with praise. As R.D.S. Jack points out, the most common descriptor was that of 'genius': Robert Louis Stevenson hailed him as 'a man of genius'; the drama critic James Agate called him an 'irritating genius'; and William Archer described him as 'a humourist of original and delightful genius' (qtd in Jack, *Never land* 3).² J.A. Hammerton's *J.M. Barrie: the Story of a Genius* (1929), in which Barrie is hailed as 'the finest embodiment of Scotland's national genius' (338), exemplifies the hagiographic approach that generally prevailed. However, after Barrie's death in 1939 interest in his work waned. He was increasingly seen as old-fashioned and sentimental and dismissed as a late-Victorian or, even worse, an Edwardian writer — the kiss of death since Woolf's attack in her essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'. Since Barrie's death, his plays — with the exception of *Peter Pan* — have rarely been performed on the professional stage, his novels have remained out of print, and, until very recently, critical monographs on his oeuvre have been few and far between. As Jack notes, Barrie appears to have fallen 'from a position above criticism to one below it' (*Never land* 6).

But as interest in Barrie's work declined, fascination with his life increased. The BBC documentary drama, *The Lost Boys* (1978), written by Andrew Birkin, and the subsequent publication of Birkin's book, *J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys* (1979), marked a turning point in public perceptions of Barrie. Birkin had unprecedented access to Barrie's letters, journals and notebooks. Particularly significant, though, was the input of the last surviving Llewelyn Davies boy,

2 Whilst Barrie writes NeverLand as a single word in the *Peter Pan* texts, critics have sometimes chosen to write it as two words, as Jack does here. In this chapter I have duplicated the individual usage of each writer.

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Nico, who gave Birkin access to his family's private letters and papers, and was himself interviewed. Whilst Birkin's book was by no means the first Barrie biography, it was the first to focus so extensively on his family trauma, and on his relationship with the Llewellyn Davies boys. Birkin's approach is scrupulously evidence-based and, unlike many who followed, he does not reduce *Peter Pan* to being merely a fictionalised account of Barrie's psychological complexes. Birkin is also at pains to repudiate the claims of paedophilia which had begun to circulate after the showing of his TV series. In his Introduction to the 1979 edition, he addresses the 'speculation that has arisen in the last decade over Barrie's sexuality' by saying:

Several psychiatrists have classified him as a paedophile, while a number of critics and viewers jumped to the same conclusion on watching *The Lost Boys*. It would seem that sexual categories, like so many judgments, lie in the eye of the beholder, and some readers will inevitably behold similar ambiguities in this book. As Barrie's sole surviving son, perhaps Nico is better placed for determining the truth; and so, while thanking him profoundly for having allowed me to trespass so freely on his past and present, I give him the last word: 'Of all the men I have ever known, Barrie was the wittiest, and the best company. He was also the least interested in sex. He was a darling man. He was an innocent; which is why he could write *Peter Pan*.' ('Introduction' 1979 n.p.)

But, as Birkin predicted, those predisposed to find Barrie a paedophile did so regardless, and in the wake of *The Lost Boys* accusations continued to proliferate. In the Introduction to the 2003 edition, Birkin cited Nico again in a further attempt to hose down such claims: 'As Nico so delightfully remarked, "I don't believe that Uncle Jim ever experienced what one might call a stirring in the undergrowth for anyone — man, woman, or child. He was an innocent ..."' ('Introduction to the Yale Edition' n.p.). Birkin has subsequently made his archival material on Barrie available online to other scholars, and in yet another letter, posted on the website, Nico reiterates:

All I can say is that I, who lived with him off and on for more than 20 years: who lived alone with him in his flat for five of these years: never heard one word or saw one glimmer of anything approaching homosexuality or paedophilia — had he had either of these leanings in however slight a symptom I would have been aware. (JMBarrie n.p.)

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In a 2001 television interview, Barrie's great-niece Margaret Sweeton described Barrie's asexuality in rather more blunt terms, stating, 'He was a runt' (qtd in Hollindale, 'A Hundred Years' 201). Yet these repeated denials from the persons most likely to know Barrie's sexual proclivities have had little effect, to judge by Barrie's listing on a site celebrating paedophilia, 'Famous British Paedophiles' (n.p.).

Another unsubstantiated claim about Barrie comes from the pen of Robert Sapolsky, in his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: a Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (1994), which, as the title indicates, is a work of popular science. Sapolsky claims that Barrie suffered from stress dwarfism — a condition in which a child stops growing in response to extreme emotional trauma and in the absence of physical causes — as a result of trying to take the place of his dead brother in his mother's affections:

The younger boy, ignored ... seizes upon this idea; by remaining a boy forever, by not growing up, he will at least have some chance of pleasing his mother, winning her love. Although there is no evidence of disease or malnutrition in his well-to-do family, he ceases growing. As an adult, he is just barely five feet in height, and his marriage is unconsummated. The forlorn boy became the author of the much-beloved children's classic, *Peter Pan*. J.M. Barrie's plays and novels are filled with children who didn't grow up ... (Sapolsky, *Zebras* 91-2)

Here, Sapolsky underscores the link between what he regards as Barrie's psychopathology and his most famous character. To wit, Barrie himself could not grow up, *ipso facto*, his texts in true Freudian fashion are inscriptions of his unconscious conflicts: the life determines and explains the text.

More contentiously, though, Sapolsky asserts that Barrie had a 'lifelong obsession with young boys, and his private writing includes passages of sadomasochism and pedophilia' (*Zebras* 308). He makes further claims in an online article dated 2002, in which he describes Barrie as 'the creepiest example of Stress dwarfism that I have encountered' (Sapolsky, *Thought Leader Forum* n.p.). However, Sapolsky's argument is undermined by his cavalier attitude to facts, which lead him to give not only an incorrect height for Barrie but also

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an incorrect date and place of birth and an incorrect age at death.³ Far more egregious than his cavalier attitude to factual accuracy, however, is Sapolsky's claim that Barrie was 'repeatedly in trouble for sadomasochistic relationships with young boys. He spent half of his fortune keeping these stories out of the newspapers. He spent his entire life unsuccessfully dealing with his Stress Dwarfism' (Sapolsky, *Thought Leader Forum* n.p.).

It is difficult to reconcile Sapolsky's position as Professor of Biological and Neurosciences at Stanford University with such factual inaccuracies and unsubstantiated claims, to say nothing of his failure to consider an alternative diagnosis for Barrie's problems.⁴ Barrie scholar Jason A. Quest dismisses Sapolsky's theory as 'a complete fiction' that 'besmirched Barrie's reputation, misrepresented his medical history' and 'utterly fabricated a legal record', concocted in order to 'spice up' his lecture on stress dwarfism (*Neverpedia* n.p.). Yet no matter how vigorously Sapolsky's theory is refuted by Barrie scholars such as Quest, it continues to be cited in the media and in undergraduate essays as if it were irrefutable fact.

A less defamatory author-based reading of Barrie is presented in the *Handbook of Psychobiography*, published by Oxford University Press in 2005. In the Introduction, William Todd Schultz avers that the aim of psychobiography is 'the understanding of persons', adding that psychobiography is an attempt to

3 Sapolsky claims that Barrie 'lived to be 60 years old and 4'10". It was confirmed in his autopsy that he never reached puberty. This is a perfect example of Stress Dwarfism' (Sapolsky, *Thought Leader Forum*). In fact, according to his passport, Barrie was substantially taller than this, and, according to Jason A. Quest, photographic records show that his adult height fell within the normal range for his family (*Neverpedia*). Furthermore, Barrie was 77 when he died. Additionally, in all his adult photos he sports a bushy moustache, which is a sign of at least some degree of sexual maturity, although it may be incomplete. No biography of Barrie mentions him having an autopsy, nor is there any obvious medical or legal reason why he should have been given one.

4 It is, for instance, possible that Barrie suffered from an endocrine disorder such as Kallmann's Syndrome (or Hypogonadotropic Hypogonadism), a disorder caused by underdeveloped testicles that fail to produce sufficient testosterone, leading to short stature and sexual dysfunction. Depending on the degree of testosterone insufficiency, some patients with this condition may attain partial sexual maturity, which would account for Barrie's abundant moustache. Kallmann's Syndrome is now recognised and treatable, but such was not the case in Barrie's day.

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solve a ‘tantalizing incoherence’ in the subject’s life (9). Schultz argues that the psychobiographer should be alert to a ‘supersaliency’: a ‘single scene encapsulating all the core parameters of a life story’ which will unlock the ‘tantalizing mystery’ of the person (48). This he refers to as ‘striking paydirt’. Artists, he claims, are exemplary subjects for psychoanalysis because they are ‘prototypical outsiders’ (136). Schultz disagrees with the notion that the art can or ought to be separated from the life, asking rhetorically — as if the answer were self-evident — ‘Does one get more out of *Peter Pan* after learning of Barrie’s brother’s death and his relationship with his mother in its wake?’ (140)

In his chapter on Barrie in the *Handbook*, Daniel M. Ogilvie’s answer to this question is never in doubt. Whilst Ogilvie dismisses Sapolsky’s theory of Stress dwarfism as lacking in evidence (182), his own analysis simply recycles the scene presented in Barrie’s memoir which recounts how the young James crept into his mother’s affections by pretending to be his dead brother. Far from offering us any new insight, the psychobiographical analysis simply affirms the story that Barrie himself advances as the explanation to understanding his life and that is central to almost every biography of him. The notion that this scene might itself be a fiction from the pen of a writer given to almost compulsive storytelling does not occur to Ogilvie. The perfect recall of dialogue, for instance, seems unlikely if we consider that the recalling subject was only six at the time. But this failure to acknowledge the possible fictionality of Barrie’s account, alongside the reductive interpretation to his text that it gives rise to, is symptomatic of the project of psychobiography articulated in the *Handbook*, which disregards the historical context in which art is created, is blind to the aesthetic choices an author might make and is wilfully ignorant of the textuality of writing. As Jack argues, the Freudian or psychobiographical approach is little more than ‘a dogged attempt to reduce all Barrie’s extremely varied output to the unity of this pre-ordained premise’, in which ‘only the discovery of the prototype is important’ (*Never land* 9). ‘Striking paydirt’ turns out to be merely stirring up weary old dust.

No such complaint can be laid at the door of Piers Dudgeon, whose recent book *Captivated: J.M. Barrie, Daphne Du Maurier & the Dark Side of Neverland*, contains the most bizarre claims ever made about Barrie. Dudgeon accuses Barrie not only of illicit sexual possession, but a crime more dastardly still: Satanic possession of the mind. Dudgeon argues that Barrie, through his Svengali-like

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powers, exercised a 'malign power' (35) over successive generations of the du Maurier family, including Sylvia Llewellyn Davies and her sons. The fact that none of his so-called victims had a bad word to say about Barrie simply proves his point. According to Dudgeon: 'most of the victims of possession when they are told to name their controller; they cannot see that they are being controlled. None of Jim's victims ever had anything bad to say about him. Nor do victims of possession in the many cases that come before the courts today' (271).

Dudgeon recycles the previous accusations of paedophilia, but his claims about Satanic 'possession' go well beyond this to accusations that Barrie continued to hold sway over his victims posthumously: 'a piece of him — a little live spark of individual consciousness — lodged in a corner of their minds until the end' (175). Because of his diabolical powers, Barrie is held responsible for every untoward event in the Llewellyn Davies and du Maurier families, including those that occurred after his death. Even his friendship with the Antarctic explorer Captain Scott is cast as an act of psychic possession; Dudgeon blames Barrie's mind control for transforming Scott into a fantasist, and thereby causing him to embark on a foolhardy expedition in the Antarctic which resulted in his death (182). More bizarre still is Dudgeon's attempt to frame the six-year-old Barrie for his brother David's death:

Suppose Jamie had travelled to Bothwell Academy with Alick and David at the end of the Christmas holiday in order to celebrate David's birthday with him, in particular to go skating with him, taking a brand new pair of birthday skates to Rothesay. Suppose Jamie had been the 'friend [who] set off on the one pair of skates which they shared', he goes on, and 'accidentally' knocked David down and was the one who 'fractured his skull'. It is of course highly speculative, but it explains the emotional dynamic between mother and son, Margaret's alienation from Jamie, and why Jamie continued, throughout his life, to make reparation. Moreover this worrying emotional dynamic between mother and son turns out to be replicated in the story of Peter Pan. (73)

Never mind that this wildly speculative scenario, scaffolded upon a tottering tower of 'supposes', does not fit with any of the established facts, such as the inconvenient fact that the six-year-old Barrie was hundreds of miles away at the time of David's death.

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Condemnation of Dudgeon's work has been universal amongst Barrie scholars. Andrew Birkin, for instance, describes 'Dudgeon's ridiculous book' as 'so full of errors, distortions, half-truths, and his own opinions passed off as fact, that I personally regard it as worthless' (JMBarrie, n.p.). Nico Llewellyn Davies's daughter Laura adds, 'I personally think Dudgeon is more or less raving mad and lives in a world of wildest fantasy'. (JMBarrie, n.p.). Craig Brown, reviewing the book in the *Daily Mail Online*, scoffs that 'conspiracy theories don't come much loopier than this' (1). Yet the book has sold well and has been endorsed, at least according to the cover blurb, by respected literary critics such as Nina Auerbach and David Lodge, so it is perhaps not surprising that Dudgeon's preposterous theory is recycled uncritically in undergraduate essays.

Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* is work of an entirely different order. Rose's book is a landmark text in children's literary studies. Its central thesis — that the child as addressed by and presented in children's fiction is a fantasy construct of innocence and purity that does the ideological work of masking the nostalgia and incompleteness of adults — is now so widely accepted as to seem self-evident, although it was a paradigm-shifting assertion at the time of publication in 1984. However, it is not her central thesis but rather her use of *Peter Pan* as primary exemplar that I focus on here. Rose is a highly regarded post-Structuralist literary critic, yet arguably even she is not immune to conflating the author, with all his purported frailties, with his text.

The Case of Peter Pan was first published shortly after Birkin's work on Barrie appeared, and Rose explicitly acknowledges the influence of Birkin's revelations:

This is to describe children's fiction, quite deliberately, as something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction. *Peter Pan* is certainly all of these. Recently we have been made at least partly aware of aware of this, as J.M. Barrie's story has been told and retold, as the story of a man and five small boys, whom he picked up, stole and possessed (Dunbar, 1970; Birkin, 1979). Barrie eventually adopted the Llewellyn Davies boys around whom he built the story of *Peter Pan*, staking a claim to them which he had already acted out symbolically by drawing them into his tale. (Rose 2-3)

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Rose compares Barrie's purported seduction of the Llewelyn Davies boys to Charles Dodgson's sexual fixation on Alice Meynell, which gave rise to another children's classic, *Alice in Wonderland* (3). Yet despite casting these aspersions on Barrie — that he was sexually obsessed with the Llewelyn Davies boys, whom he 'stole' and 'possessed' — Rose insists that her critique of Barrie's text is not dependent upon proving that Barrie was a paedophile: 'It is not relevant, therefore, to insist that nothing ever happened, or that Barrie was innocent of any interest in sex' (3). Here Rose is occupying the same ambivalent position with regards to Barrie and paedophilia as Morrison, who, as Hollindale points out, manages to simultaneously 'convict and acquit Barrie of paedophilia' (*A Hundred Years* 201). But Rose's disavowal notwithstanding, her argument is haunted by the notion that there is something sinister about the author and the genesis of his text: 'Behind *Peter Pan* lies the desire of a man for a little boy (or boys), a fantasy or drama which has only recently caught the public eye' (3). In her argument, then, the life seeps into the work: *Peter Pan* has its origin in Barrie's unspeakable desires, which it both conceals and unconsciously reveals.

But although Rose distances herself from populist claims of Barrie having acted on his paedophilic desires, the imbrication of *Peter Pan* with the violation of children runs through her book. This is particularly apparent in her introductory essay to the 1992 edition, 'The Return of Peter Pan', which situates a House of Lords debate on the play's unique copyright status in relation to the decline in government services to children and the prevalence of paedophilia. Without delineating the *actual* relationship between *Peter Pan*, perversion and child abuse, Rose repeatedly juxtaposes them in her prose. Thus, '*Peter Pan* lays bare a basic social and psychic structure — that so-called perversion resides in the house of innocence' ('Return' xii); and '*Peter Pan* offers virtuality and openness with such insistence that it seems to call attention to the trouble and murkiness not so much hidden underneath as running all along the seams' (xii). She continues:

Peter Pan is a front — a cover not as concealer but as vehicle — for what is most unsettling and uncertain about the relationship between adult and child. It shows innocence not as a property of childhood but as a portion of adult desire. In this context, the eruptions in the 1980s, as they relate

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to *Peter Pan* and to childhood more generally, can be read as the return of the repressed. (xii)

As her reference to the 1980s suggests, Rose is writing at the historical moment when anxiety about paedophilia was becoming an abiding obsession in Britain, and which has since given rise to such a level of panic that even the most well-intentioned of interactions between man and child is viewed with suspicion. As Hollindale and others have noted, this linking of Barrie's text with paedophilia speaks more about the cultural moment from which Rose is writing than about the text itself. Hollindale describes Britain as now enduring 'a period when justified terror of paedophile assault has been seen to mutate into witch-hunts aimed at the innocent and proscription of harmless contacts between male adults and children' ('A Hundred Years' 201).

Much recent work on *Peter Pan* has taken issue with this aspect of Rose's argument. For instance, Alison B. Kavey argues that Rose 'conflates the sexual abuse of children with the literary text of *Peter Pan* ... The tale is not the author and the author is not the tale' ('Introduction' 4). And, significantly, recent scholarship has turned away from the author-based criticism that I have outlined above towards an examination of how the Peter Pan texts reflect their historical moment of production.⁵ Of the two collections published in the past eight years, *J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan in and Out of Time: a Children's Classic at 100* and *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination*, the former in particular has concerned itself with reinstating Peter Pan in history. Essays in that collection read the various *Pan* texts productively in relation to Edwardian discourses of childhood, gender, race and Empire, and *fin-de-siècle* discourses of Decadence and aestheticism.

Other recent scholarship has read Peter Pan as a response to modernity itself. Wilson, for example, argues that the representation of Mr Darling speaks of middle-class anxieties about work in the climate of increasing technological change in the workplace: '*Peter Pan* is a fable of modernity, anxiously negotiating industrial technologies that produced a middle class predicated on instability and which encoded impossible roles for men and women' (Wilson 8). The text's deliberate creation of nostalgia, she argues, is a way of managing anxiety about

⁵ I use the unitalicised Peter Pan to refer to the whole body of Pan texts, and the italicised *Peter Pan* to refer to the stage play of that name.

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modernity, in which NeverLand functions as an idealisation of what never was: 'nostalgia for a (mis)remembered past now gone' (Wilson 9). R.D.S. Jack discusses Barrie's dramatic works as responses to modernity in his book, *The Road to the Never Land: A Reassessment of J.M. Barrie's Dramatic Art*, which is an ambitious examination of Barrie's engagement with significant modern thinkers, most notably Darwin, Nietzsche and Roget. Jack's study is a serious attempt to reinstate Barrie as a modern dramatist alongside Ibsen, Shaw and Wilde, who were considered his equals during his lifetime.

By and large, though, these recent attempts at finding Barrie a place in literary history have privileged thematics over stylistics. As yet, little consideration has been given to where Barrie's prose works sit on the greater historical continuum from Victorianism to Modernism in *stylistic* terms. Interestingly, despite her apparent reservations about Barrie, Rose is almost the only critic who comments on his prose style in relation to literary history. If we disregard the aspect of her argument which is haunted by 'Peter Panic', and turn to her discussion of Barrie's prose style, Rose hints at a productive line of inquiry that merits further consideration. Here I refer to the radical instability of tone and narrative address that is so striking in the novels *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and *Peter and Wendy*.

A little textual history is in order here, for the Peter Pan texts have a long and complicated history. The first published text in the *Peter Pan* corpus is a novel for adults, *The Little White Bird* (1902). This novel recounts its narrator's obsessive relationship with a poor couple and their baby Peter, who flies out of his nursery at one week of age to live with the birds on an island. This was the genesis of the eternal boy in the play, *Peter Pan*, which was first performed in 1904, and published as a play script in 1928.⁶ The novel, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, which came out as a children's book in 1906, contains the Peter Pan sections of *The Little White Bird*. In 1911, Barrie published *Peter and Wendy*, which is usually described as the novelised version of the play, but which contains more characterisation, adds several scenes (most notably a new ending) and provides a great deal of authorial commentary. Confusingly, its name was changed to *Peter Pan and Wendy* in 1924, and even more confusingly later became simply

6 Barrie continued to revise the play for performance until his death in 1937, so there are multiple versions of the play script extant.

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Peter Pan, usurping the name of the play. Currently, the novel is published under the name *Peter and Wendy*. To complicate matters further, there are innumerable bowdlerised and simplified versions of both play and novel not authored by Barrie in existence, which are marketed under the name of *Peter Pan*.

The most notable difference between the novels, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and *Peter and Wendy*, and the play *Peter Pan*, is the presence of narrative commentary in the novels. To some extent, this replaces the extensive stage directions characteristic of Barrie's play scripts, but it goes much further, creating rapid and bewildering changes of tone and narrative address. Take the opening paragraph of *Peter and Wendy*:

All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, 'Oh, why can't you remain like this forever!' This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end. (69)

This passage is marked by slippage from a universalising statement, to the external description of the scene by the omniscient narrator, to the intrusion of the unidentified narrator in the 'I' of 'I suppose', to the assumption of the child's point of view, 'you always know after you are two', back to an universalising statement: 'Two is the beginning of the end'. The tone ranges from neutral observation, identification with the mother's sentiments, to parody of the tragicomic grandiosity of the concluding statement. The question of who is speaking and who is being addressed is left open.

Throughout the novel, this same refusal to occupy any stable position of enunciation is evident. The following passage, which depicts the grieving Mrs Darling sleeping in the nursery just as the children are about to return home from Neverland, is a further illustration of how shifts in narrative voice and address produce an ambivalent tone:

You see, the woman had no proper spirit. I had meant to say extraordinarily nice things about her; but I despise her, and not one of them will I say now. She does not really need to be told to have things ready, for they are ready.

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All the beds are aired, and she never leaves the house, and observe, the window is open. For all the use we are to her, we might go back to the ship. However, as we are here we may as well stay and look on. That is all we are, lookers-on. Nobody really wants us. So let us watch and say jaggy things, in the hope that some of them will hurt. (*Peter and Wendy* 208)

Two pages on, readers are told, 'Now that we look at her closely and remember the gaiety of her in the old days, all gone now just because she has lost her babes, I find I won't be able to say nasty things about her after all. If she was too fond of her rubbishy children she couldn't help it' (*Peter and Wendy* 210). Here the narrative voice moves from scorn to self-pity back to scorn: the phrases 'say jaggy things, in the hope some of them will hurt' and 'rubbishy children' are redolent of the spiteful speech of an adolescent. Is this, as some have assumed, Peter Pan himself speaking? At other times, the narrative voice seems to speak from the position of a child, only to slip into the alternately indulgent and moralising perspective of an adult describing children:

Everything just as it should be, you see. Off we skip like the most heartless things in the world, which is what children are, but so attractive; and we have an entirely selfish time; and then when we have need of special attention we nobly return for it, confident that we shall be embraced instead of smacked. (*Peter and Wendy* 166)

In this passage, children are both the subjects — 'we' — and the objects — 'so attractive', and this oscillation between child, adolescent and adult perspectives, in which each is savagely satirised, this refusal to occupy any stable position of enunciation, combined with the constantly shifting tone, underscores the deeply ambiguous nature of Barrie's depiction of both child and adult.

In his Introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and *Peter and Wendy*, Hollindale comments on the effects of the unstable tone and narrative voice in the novels:

Again it is comedy which gives Barrie permission to enter territory where children's literature did not at that time usually go. Arbitrary, comic-serious, sudden changes in the narrative voice give the comedy its characteristic tone. Its remarkable achievement is to bring satire within children's compass, without forfeiting the more straightforward lures of fairy story, fantasy, and adventure. In both the stories, however, a Chinese-boxes narrative is at work, and below the surface another narrative voice

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is speaking which is likely to be audible only to grown-ups ... Under the surface of the children's book is a sharp and sometimes ferocious dialectic, exploring the collision and relation of the child and adult worlds. (xxi)

For Hollindale, this 'disconcerting and destabilizing narrative intrusion' is for the most part masterly, at least for the adult reader, and he argues that the complexity of their narrative procedures renders the prose texts of *Peter Pan* 'very complex works which we are still learning how to read' (xxv). Rudd similarly celebrates the narrative plurality of the novel, arguing that the prose versions of *Peter Pan* are heteroglossic in the Bakhtinian sense of containing multiple discourses collaboratively made (298).

Rose alone relates Barrie's sport with narrative voice and enunciation to literary Modernism, albeit obliquely. Her argument rests on a distinction between the myth of Peter Pan as emblematic of childish innocence as it circulates in culture, and the actual texts that Barrie penned. She relates that Barrie was reluctant to write the novels: 'Barrie persistently refused to write a prose version of the play, and when he did, it was a failure, almost incomprehensible, and later had to be completely rewritten' (6). For the most part, it is the sanitised rewritings of the novel by others which have been made available to children, and have formed the basis of versions in other media; the original is rarely read. Barrie's originals were considered to be 'almost incomprehensible' failures because they did not adhere to the dominant aesthetic of children's literature: realism. According to Rose, 'Realism — in the sense in which we have seen it defined here for children — is that form of writing which attempts to reduce to an absolute minimum our awareness of the language in which a story is written in order that we will take it for real' (65). In her view, *Peter and Wendy* is a 'dual travesty — a travesty of the basic rules of literary representation for children, and a mixing of genres' (83). Rose argues that the books of the 'Golden Age' of children's fiction, amongst which the Peter Pan texts are usually included, were largely untouched by the linguistic and formal experimentation of Modernism (65).

Rose's assertions about Barrie are part of a larger argument about the question of address in classic children's fiction, which she views as a body of texts that rest on a rupture between writer and addressee. This is in contradistinction

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to the concomitant developments in adult fiction, which was increasingly foregrounding narrative voice and interrogating the rupture between writer and reader. In contrast, according to Rose, the children's book 'works precisely to the extent that any question of who is talking to whom, and why, is totally erased' (2). With this assertion Rose conveniently ignores a whole tradition of children's literature, from the limerick and nonsense rhyme to Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Astrid Lundgren, Norman Lindsey and Dr Seuss, which insistently foregrounds language and, to varying degrees, plays with tone, address and point of view, as Rudd points out (292-3). Disavowing this tradition of linguistic play in children's literature enables Rose's assertion that *Peter Pan*, ostensibly a book *for* children which foregrounds language and constantly calls into question narrative address, must be a failure. Rose paraphrases the traditional view of children's fiction thus:

The demand for better and more cohesive writing in children's fiction ... carries with it a plea that certain psychic barriers should go undisturbed, the most important of which is the barrier between adult and child. When children's fiction touches on that barrier, it becomes not experiment ... but *molestation*. Thus the writer for children must keep his or her narrative hands clean and stay in his or her place. (Rose 70, emphasis in original)

Barrie's narrative hands are dirty because his prose transgresses boundaries that critics regard as sacrosanct: those between narrator and characters, and adult and child. That Rose couches a textual or generic 'offence' in sexual terms — *molestation* — hints at the residual 'Peter Panic' underpinning her argument.

However, the claim that Barrie's prose style in the *Peter Pan* novels is a form of textual molestation of children is undermined by even a cursory reading of Barrie's other novels, all of which were written for an adult market. From the very first page of his most successful novel *Sentimental Tommy* (1896), the narrative voice calls attention to the compact between reader and writer to mutually create and sustain the fiction: 'The celebrated Tommy first comes into view on a dirty London stair, and he was in sexless garments, which were all he had, and he was five, and so though we are looking at him, we must do it sideways, lest he sit down hurriedly to hide them' (*Sentimental Tommy* 1). In both *Sentimental Tommy* and its sequel, *Tommy and Grizel* (1900), commentary from the unidentified narrator frequently intrudes upon the action, so that the illusion of verisimilitude is fatally undermined. For example:

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Oh, who by striving could make himself a boy again as Tommy could! I tell you he was always irresistible then. What is genius? It is the power to be a boy again at will. When I think of him flinging off the years and whistling childhood back, not to himself only, but to all who heard, distributing it among them gaily, imperiously calling on them to dance ... I cannot wonder that Grizel loved him. I am his slave myself ... (*Tommy and Grizel* 214)

The self-conscious narration of this passage, in which the narrative voice calls attention to itself and, by calling itself the protagonist's 'slave', broaches boundaries between narrator and characters, is typical of Barrie's prose style. Furthermore, Barrie's narrator frequently addresses the reader directly — almost conspiratorially — in a manner that verges on the metafictional: 'She is not so broken-hearted, after all, you may be saying, and I had promised to break her heart. But, honestly, I don't know how to do it more thoroughly, and you must remember that we have not seen her alone yet' (*Tommy and Grizel* 287).

Far from being evidence of his 'molestation' of the child through the medium of the book, Barrie's *Tommy* novels demonstrates that the foregrounding of narrative voice and the broaching of boundaries between narrator and characters constitute Barrie's habitual procedure, whether his prose is aimed at children or at adults.

Indeed, there is considerable doubt as to whether the *Peter Pan* texts were ever intended for children. Barrie never otherwise wrote for children; out of his large body of work only the *Peter Pan* texts have come to be regarded as children's literature. Yet this may be by accident rather than design, as many commentators have pointed out. Not a single child was invited to the opening night of the play *Peter Pan*; it was not until children attended a later matinee that its enormous appeal for them became apparent, and it was subsequently marketed as a work for children (see Chaney 225-40). The question of the text's intended audience has exercised many critics, including Rose herself, who argues — somewhat paradoxically, given her claim that it is a failure as a children's book — that '*Peter Pan* has never ... been a book for children at all' (1).

When read through the lens of textuality rather than sexuality, cultural history rather than pathology, Barrie's prose style seems neither a failure nor incomprehensible, but rather an early manifestation of those representational practices that we have come to call Modernist. That Barrie's *Tommy* novels

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ought to be considered precursors to, or early manifestations of, Modernism has already been mooted. Andrew Nash cites a review of *Sentimental Tommy* in *The Nation* in 1897 that suggests the novel's focus on the interior life of the artist would herald a 'new dawn' in the literary representation of the mind of the writer. He also mentions that T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence were readers of the novel. Lawrence was impressed enough to write that it had helped him understand his own predicament, which supports the notion that it be viewed as an 'unacknowledged precursor to modernism' (Nash, 'A Phenomenally Slow Producer' 53). Nash goes on to argue that the *Tommy* novels' emphasis on the emotional or 'sentimental' as an aspect of masculinity is particularly *avant-garde*:

Barrie's work can be identified as an important contribution to one of the most forward-looking idioms of his age. Anxiety over male sexuality and its relationship with creativity was to become a commonplace of modernism and it is perhaps not surprising that a young D.H. Lawrence responded to the *Tommy* novels with great enthusiasm, suggesting, in a letter to Jessie Chambers, that they helped to define the way he felt about himself. ('Trying to be a Man' 125)

However, Michelle Ann Abate argues that in its depiction of the relation between masculinity and sentiment, *Sentimental Tommy* models 'emerging modernist forms of queer sexuality' rather than new masculine identities:

With his sexual impotence and his inability to engage in "normal" heterosexual relations, the book's title character can most accurately be described as a modern queer figure, and one whose queerness is, paradoxically, the source of both his personal pain and his professional creativity. (476)⁷

For both Nash and Abate, the *Tommy* novels herald new modernist subjectivities. This same claim can be made about the *Peter Pan* texts, in which Barrie destabilises the boundaries between adult and child, interpellating sequentially or simultaneously the child in the adult and the adult in the child. Thus, Paul D. Fox argues that Neverland is a 'repudiation of the impositional strictures

⁷ Abate notes that the novels have often been read as biographically revealing of Barrie's own sexual difficulties, but from her perspective Barrie's asexuality is an instance of 'queer sexuality' rather than evidence of latent paedophilia (474). She seems to suggest here that it is not just Barrie's texts but Barrie himself who models a new kind of subject.

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of Edwardian discourse that equally determine adult and child' (254), and that Barrie attempts to undermine any such boundaries or fixed identities. Rather, he requires his readers 'to imagine, to fictively produce, new ways of conceiving the world, and its patterns of relationships' (259), including those between adults and children. Although Rose notes that '*Peter Pan* was written at the time of Freud' (10), the implication of her study is that Barrie himself was unaware of Freud's ideas. However, it could be argued that, with his postulation of the child and adult as coterminous — with the child always telescoped within the adult — Barrie underscores Freud's notion that childhood experiences and fantasies are pivotal to the formation of adult psychic life.

In fact, Barrie's position is closer to the Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents* than to his theories of psycho-sexual development; the brief description of John in the final chapter of *Peter and Wendy* is a tragic indictment of the cost of growing up and assuming a fixed adult identity, of the dead hand of 'civilization' which Barrie so abhorred: 'The bearded man who doesn't know any story to tell his children was once John' (220). Telling stories is the verbal equivalent of play in the Barrie pantheon: Peter may be the embodiment of play, but Wendy is the embodiment of story. That adulthood entails the end of play and the end of stories equates it with the death of the imaginary and creativity: adulthood is thus the antithesis of NeverLand because it entails a fixed and hence diminished subjectivity. With the loss of play and story, the subject is lost to her or himself: the man who 'was once John' is reduced to a nameless fossil.

Through its ambivalent tone and linguistic play, its destabilisation of narrative voice and narrative address, its broaching of boundaries between narrators, characters and readers, and its modelling of new forms of subjectivity, Barrie's prose fiction, such as *Peter and Wendy*, is a harbinger of the experimentation in literary representation which emerged at the end of the Victorian age and gathered pace after World War I. In situating Barrie's novels in relation to Modernism, I am not making grand claims; his narrative and linguistic experimentation is clearly not of the same order as that of Joyce or Woolfe. But if, as Peter Childs claims, '[t]he tendency towards narrative relativity, before and after Einstein, is perhaps the most striking aspect of Modernist fiction, from Conrad and James to Proust and Woolf, in its use of perspective, unreliability, anti-absolutism, instability, individuality and subjective perceptions' (66), then

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Barrie's play with enunciation, his rapid-fire shifts in narrative perspective and the remarkable instability of tone that characterises all his later novels, including the *Peter Pan* texts, surely qualify him to be considered, if not as a fully-fledged Modernist, then as a proto-Modernist. If we turn our attention from Barrie's purported perversions to his prose, it is clear, I suggest, that Barrie himself was challenging the fixities of the Victorian subject through formal experimentation and the interpellation of new subjectivities. Surely, a detailed consideration of Barrie's work in relation to Modernism is long overdue.

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