

## "Demons of Wickedness, Angels of Delight": Hawthorne, Woolf, and the Child

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In addition to works cited herein, the culture of Victorian childhood and influences on Virginia Stephen may be traced in *Stories for Children, Essays for Adults: The Unpublished Writings of Julia Stephen*, ed. Diane Gillespie and Elizabeth Steele; "Lewis Carroll" in *The Moment and Other Essays*; "Mr. Hudson's Childhood" and "A Russian Schoolboy" in the *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, ed. Andrew McNeillie; and "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind.

*There is something that almost frightens me about the child—I know not whether elfish or angelic, but, at all events, supernatural.*  
Hawthorne, *American Notebooks*

*To be a child is to be very literal: to find everything so strange that nothing is surprising; to be heartless, to be ruthless, yet to be so passionate that a snub or a shadow drapes the world in gloom.*  
Woolf, *Collected Essays*

Interactions between children and adults, children's books and books for adults, and reading as a child and writing as an adult are issues central to contemporary critical theory and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> Among the many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors who have written for children and for adults—from William Makepeace Thackeray, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Oscar Wilde to Sylvia Plath, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Ken Kesey—Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) stand out because of the unusual ways they represent what Hawthorne termed the "unestimated sensibility" of the child (*CE* 7: 4).<sup>2</sup> Rarely conforming to the sentimental pieties of his day, children appear in unprecedented number in Hawthorne's domestic essays and tales, juvenile literature, and late romances. Among the first to speak in American literature, Hawthorne's children are

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also strikingly voluble in lifelike talk, inscrutable outbursts, and precocious questions. All of Woolf's major works sketch some aspect of infancy, childhood, or adolescence to show how the formative life of an individual gives rise to the multiple identities of the adult. Not only is consciousness in her art determined by the impressionability of early life, but the central drama of her fiction is the relation which a character forms with the past. Idealizing the separate integrity of the child, the narratives of Hawthorne and Woolf eschew "the adult obsession with facts" (Dusinberre 1991) for the nonconformist vision of those who find with Woolf "the only exciting life is the imaginary one" (*Writer's Diary* 126). Finally, the revolution in juvenile literature, which Hawthorne hoped to instigate with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the 1830s and which later influenced Victorian childhoods like Virginia Stephen's, also advanced both writers' redefinitions of the novel—as romance or elegy, play-poem or novel-essay. Thus, despite differences in gender, class, education, and nationality, the temperamental affinity of these memory-ridden artists centers on the child. Their use of this protean figure throughout their pioneering careers is complex, related to their concern with origins and the past, their early emotional deprivations, self-doubts as authors, and their protracted sense of being literary outsiders. The isolation and receptivity of the young symbolize their highest ideal: the creative power and freedom of the unfettered imagination to live in a world of its own making.

Had Hawthorne lived into his eighties, the young Virginia Stephen might have encountered this "classic" American author as Victorian sage or hoary storyteller like the one he created in *Grandfather's Chair* (1841), a generation older than her father and other "great men" like Henry James (1843–1916) who were his friends (*Moments of Being* 136). Yet it is striking that although Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) read Hawthorne aloud to his children, along with Shakespeare and Austen (*Essays* 1: 128), Woolf does not discuss his works in her essays, letters, or memoirs. Three years before her death, however, when she attempted to sum up the year 1938 in her diary, she cut to the quick, questioning her concern with writing:

On the whole the art becomes absorbing—more? No, I think it's been absorbing ever since I was a little creature, scribbling a story in the manner of Hawthorne on the green plush sofa in the drawing room at St. Ives while the grown ups dined. (*Writer's Diary* 298)

Looking back at fifty-six, Woolf seems less pessimistic about aging than Wordsworth in the *Intimations Ode* or than Mrs. Ramsay, who asks why her children must grow up and "lose it all" (*Lighthouse* 91). But the manner in which the writer situates her nascent self in the "border territory" of romantic tradition (Swingle 271) is striking: a child in a house by the sea, rapt in invention, pens a tale in a green world of her own. Like the strange effect of mingled fire and moonlight on his deserted study in "The Custom-House," where Hawthorne dramatizes the conditions congenial to the

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creation of romance, this scene of writing pointedly contrasts the solitary child (a little "scribbling woman") and the conventionality of adult life. Like Hawthorne, intimately cited here as precursor, Woolf saw her work as a fusion of opposites—of inner and outer realities, vision and fact, dream and reality—which, like the attempt to represent the interior life of a child, requires an artistic sleight of hand, the capacity to write out of both sides of the mind at once.

Coming late in life, as her revelation of sexual abuse as a child did, this diary entry is provocative in suggesting how formative experiences may escape registration. It reminds us that what is unspoken in Woolf functions like Hawthorne's stylistic reticence: from her early desire to write "a novel about Silence" or "the things people don't say" (*Voyage Out* 216) to the wordlessness of her fictional children, ellipsis or absence may magnify significance. Like her kinship with Walter Pater, the reclusive misogynist and university patriarch whose suppressed influence is documented in Perry Meisel's *The Absent Father*, Woolf's feminist revision of her first literary model must be inferred. For example, during her fifteenth summer, when she was still reading Hawthorne "after her light was supposed to have been put out" (Bell 57), she began imitating the Elizabethans. "Entranced" by the "large yellow page" and "obscure adventures" of Hakluyt's *Voyages*, "lugged home" by her father from the London library, Virginia Stephen wrote essays entitled *Religio Laici*, a history of women and a history of her own family "all very longwinded and Elizabethan in style" (*Writer's Diary* 147). This adolescent passion for the sixteenth century, like Hawthorne's obsession with the Puritans and his effort to relate his own family heritage (especially the infamous Judge Hathorne of the Salem witch trials) to the New England past, did not flag with maturity. It flowered in middle age with the "child's play" (*Diary* 3: 264) of *Orlando* (1928) where her "Proustian fascination" with old families and great homes (Brewster 121) surveys cultural transformations from the English Renaissance to the present. As in Hawthorne's juvenile work, *Grandfather's Chair*, where children, conceived from Calvinist and Wordsworthian points of view, reflect on anecdotes symbolic of colonial history, the sex-changing and cross-period-dressing Orlando challenges the gender stereotypes of her 300-year prime of life. Like the romantic poets, who permeate her work but whom Woolf never discusses, Hawthorne's romances are an unwritten premise of her art. The elusive child—in the paradoxical ways they present this prismatic figure—embodies their common preoccupation with the transfiguring imagination and the fluctuating, spectral self.

The way in which adults conceived of childhood altered radically during the first half of the nineteenth century. Romantic ideas about the child's divine innocence permeated transcendentalist thought, educational reforms, the Sunday School movement, the growth of pediatrics, and the spawning of a new secular literature for and about children. The Calvinist notion of infant damnation was finally discarded, and gentler discipline was advocated in the child-rearing manuals, now addressed to mothers, which proliferated after 1830. The egalitarian American marriage and

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child-centered family impressed Alexis de Tocqueville on his visit in 1831. Reflecting on this shift in sentiment occurring during his own generation, Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted a friend, a "witty physician," who lamented that "it was a misfortune to have been born when children were nothing and to live until men were nothing" (qtd. in Cable 101).

The energetic career of Hawthorne's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who was converted by William Ellery Channing's reading of Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode*, conveys the scale of expectation associated with children and their education during this period. With her older sister Mary, who married Horace Mann in 1843, she opened schools, wrote texts for the nursery, guides for teachers, and pioneered the kindergarten movement in this country. Not surprisingly, one of Elizabeth's first pupils, her youngest sister Sophia, anticipated motherhood and domestic education as ideal extensions of her former vocation as an artist. The adults surrounding Hawthorne's early life could have had little such confidence in the purity of childhood or maternal power. The author's early orphanhood—his father's death at sea when the boy was four, the loss of a parental home, subsequent adoption by uncles, and lengthy separations from his mother—suggests the deprivations which inspired sentimental and serious writers throughout the nineteenth century. After Captain Hawthorne died in Surinam, his widow returned to her family home on Herbert Street in Salem and depended on her Manning brothers to become surrogate fathers for the three children. Pragmatic Uncle Robert Manning, who supervised Nathaniel's schooling in Salem, may also have imparted to his nephew the suspicion that the artistic side of his nature was morally weak or effeminate. Early letters from Salem indicate that as an adolescent the boy felt chastised by his aunts and that he deeply missed his mother, who had moved to the family home in Raymond, Maine. After visits there, he always looked back on this northern frontier as paradise, penning at sixteen an elegiac poem, "Days of My Youth." Hawthorne's parental loss and early sense of displacement may explain his nostalgia, as well as his need to remain at home, in his "natal spot" of Salem, with his mother and two sisters for "twelve dark years" after graduating from Bowdoin College.

The author's uncertainty about his origins is reflected in his literary focus on childhood and detailed observations he made of his own children. Remembered as a doting parent, he recorded vicissitudes of the nursery in *The American Notebooks*. His empiricism was tempered, however, by his scrutiny of two-year-old Julian for "recollections of a pre-existence" (CE 8: 400) and his belief that "it is with children as Mr. Emerson . . . says it is with nature . . . the best manifestations of them must take you at unawares" (8: 409). That he did not always maintain his wife's rhapsodic faith in the perfection of their offspring is evidenced by the ironic humor of "Twenty Days with Julian & Little Bunny," a diary kept while playing nurse to Julian in Sophia's absence and the problematic, even frightening experience of watching firstborn Una: "I now and then catch an aspect of her, in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil" (8: 430–

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31). His haunted regard of this "elfish or angelic" daughter conjures up his insubstantiality and self-doubt, recalling Emerson again: "Nature is a mere mirror, and shows to each man only his own quality."

In Hawthorne's case, shifting representations of the child mirror multiple qualities of the author: his artistic calling, bizarre feeling of unreality, and obsession with "the foul cavern of the heart" his fiction explores. On the one hand, Hawthorne personally identified with the special, unspoiled perception of the child in Rousseau, Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. A lifelong pattern of defining or renewing himself artistically through young females culminated in his marriage to the delicate and unworldly Sophia Peabody, who "looked upon herself as a little girl" (Pearson 267). It is also reflected in the innocent wonder of such characters as the "sinless" child in "Little Annie's Ramble" (1835); Alice, "a flower bud fresh from paradise," in *Grandfather's Chair* (CE 6: 51); and Pansie Dolliver in Hawthorne's last unfinished romance, all of whom dispel the gloom of their aged male companions. In "The Gentle Boy" (1832), however, the brokenhearted Quaker child who is abandoned and then martyred functions as a tragic projection of the artistic sensibility. Despite Hawthorne's resistance to transcendentalism, the contemporary setting of "The Snow Image" (1851), where realistic infantile speech constitutes almost the entire dialogue (Hurst 10), shows the vulnerability of "a childish miracle": adults inevitably lose belief and casually disregard children's godlike way of seeing. On the other hand, the "brood of baby-fiends" (CE 9: 92) who stone Ibrahim and the savage children who taunt Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* dramatize a darker, more Augustinian view of the young. Whether absorbed from his upbringing or reading of Puritan sermons, essays, and memoris, inherent perversity as well as spiritual precocity distinguish Hawthorne's metamorphic representation of the child.

The wild and prescient behavior of Pearl, partially modeled on Una's, illustrates how unresolved tensions in Hawthorne's imagination created "the most enigmatic child in literature." As Barbara Garlitz has argued, Pearl "can become all things to all men," having been variously interpreted by critics as childlike and unchildlike, as prelapsarian innocent and "darksome fairy," as disordered nature and "symbolized conscience," as a manifestation of the id and of our hopeful future, as an example of moral indifference and Rousseauian natural goodness, as an unnatural recluse from society and a redemptive agent (689). In fact the kaleidoscope of responses to Pearl surveyed constitutes a history of juvenile vice ranging from Puritan superstition about demon offspring to the physico-theological laws of bad heredity of Hawthorne's day to the natural lawlessness or animality ascribed to childish aggression in the last third of the nineteenth century (695). A microcosm of Hester's moral chaos, Pearl is filled with hate and bitterness even as she manifests an uncanny instinct for truth. As Melville, who recognized the subjectivism of his own reading, said of Hawthorne, Pearl is "immeasurably deeper than the plummet of the mere critic" (16). Unsettling the Puritan community's (and the critic's) attempt to name, or fix the

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identity of, this problematic outcast, Hawthorne's Pearl, like his other unfathomable types, prefigures the use of indeterminacy by modernist writers like Woolf.

Such contradictory views of childhood make the juvenile works Hawthorne published between 1835 and 1853 strikingly uneven. The myths, or purely imaginative works, he was proudest of now seem an odd cul-de-sac in the history of American juvenile fiction. The frame stories, however, he constructed for all six collections—*The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair* (originally published in three volumes: *Grandfather's Chair*, *Liberty Tree*, and *Famous Old People*), *Biographical Stories for Children* (1842), and the two *Wonder Books* (1851, 1853)—rely on native, contemporary settings which forecast the local and realistic trends of subsequent children's books like *The Widow and the Parrot* (1982), Woolf's tongue-in-cheek tale of the English village, Rodmell. Especially striking is the fireside setting of *Grandfather's Chair*, a "neutral territory" or flickering mental space between child and storyteller, which emerged a decade later in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*: "somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (CE 1: 36). Whether hearing Una play outside his study inspired him, as Julian claimed, or this middle ground from his first children's book empowered him, the dreamy and democratized perspectives which inaugurated the great age of English children's books are foreshadowed in Hawthorne and developed in modernism. Just as Woolf remarked about Carroll's two Alice books they are not "books for children; they are the only books in which we become children" (*The Moment and Other Essays* 70–71), Hawthorne and Woolf display a childlike consciousness—cocooned, specular, weightless—even when they are not writing about children (Coveney 314).

Indeed, children, the only artists (these writers might think) who draw with complete authority, inspired their masterpieces: *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Written in response to the death of the mother, both works allowed the authors to exorcise the past. Although Hawthorne married the angel in the house, and Woolf was her daughter, both writers expressed their antipatriarchal rage in the idealization of a childlike inwardness and creative potential (Herbert 258). Organized in response to the unanswered question of a persistent child, these family romances are less plots than tableaux juxtaposed, static scenes frozen in Time. Pearl's insistent "Whose child am I?" and James's urgent query as to when he will go to the lighthouse instigate quests for autonomy which move from enchanted dependence on a beautiful maternal heroine to a humanized, more "objective" awareness of resolution and independence. Caught between regal, sadly reflective, enigmatic mothers and self-centered, dependent, puritanical fathers, both Pearl and James perversely mirror and displace what their parents' withhold—Hester who can't explain "A," Mr. Ramsay stuck at "R." They fixate instead on their own symbol making, Pearl's seaweed letter critiquing Hester's scarlet one and James's boar's skull signifying the stark knowledge of his father. Nailed to the bedroom wall, this totem

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of danger and death cannot be touched by Mrs. Ramsay, and although its shadows keep his sister awake, James will not sleep without it.

Dimmesdale and Mr. Ramsay, unable to speak to children "as children," are unnerved by their passion—Pearl's tantrum in the forest and James's ruthless will. Coldly frustrating desire, each father creates a hostile, "mother's child" until a gesture of paternal acknowledgment breaks the spell. Pearl leaves her mother and New England, marries and bears children in Europe, while James at sixteen, steering the boat with grim determination, exchanges the fantasy of killing his father for the less heroic achievement of earning his praise. Like the delayed "recognition" scene acted out by the strange complicity of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth (Ragussis 67), James's identification with Mr. Ramsay's power to dominate others finally enables him to let go of the torment of the past, when his mother left him for his father, "impotent, ridiculous, sitting on the floor grasping a pair of scissors" (*Lighthouse* 278).

In his autobiography, Frederick Buechner describes childhood as "a waiting for you do not know just what and living, as you live in dreams, with little or no sense of sequence or consequence or measurable time" (39). The expedition to the lighthouse which James has dreamed of making "for years and years it seemed" is a symbol of frustration precisely because he is a child and any postponement is thus not simply a matter of time—another day or week—but intensifies that exquisite impatience which is childhood itself. Like the artist, the lover, and the "true romantic," Woolf's children do not homogenize or generalize experience. That James—lacking detachment or a sense of proportion—is embedded in his perceptions lends his awareness special vividness and truth. Sitting with his army and navy cut-outs, James sees one detail or absolute quality at a time, cutting out each picture in its fresh singularity. Woolf praised Aksadoff for revealing this curious aspect of the child's mind, how it is "taken up with what we call childish things together with premonitions of another kind of life, and with moments of extreme insight into its surroundings" (*Books and Portraits* 102).

That children's language goes largely unrecorded in Woolf does not indicate that she thought them voiceless creatures, seen but not heard by their elders. Unlike Hawthorne, however, she gives their silence a vital narrative and thematic role, seeing early epiphanies as the elusive core of life and entrapment in adult roles as tantamount to the dulling of perception. Mary Jane Hurst has shown that in *The Scarlet Letter* heuristic, regulatory, and informational-interpretative speech categories account for only two thirds of Pearl's discourse while "the remainder of her speech falls into expressive, imaginative, and poetic categories, elements almost entirely absent from the reported direct discourse of the adults to her" (73). But the question of James, who at six has no doubt asked his mother about the expedition more than once, is pointedly deleted from the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*: at the critical juncture where text begins, only the mother's response is recorded. Likewise the speechless vulnerability of George Oliver in *Between the Acts* (1941) is paradoxically related to his primitive, invincible power: seeing a flower whole, the bound-

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aries of the toddler's being dissolve in a mystical revelation of perception and sensation. The elder Mr. Oliver, like the callous grownups in "The Snow Image," terrifies his grandson out of this private theater of rapture by putting on a snout of newspaper, coming at him like a "peaked, eyeless monster," and then calling George "a crybaby—a crybaby" (13).

The "blackness" Melville saw in Hawthorne no doubt seemed to Woolf a vestige of "the old-fashioned Calvinism, with all its horrors," she found in Oliver Wendell Holmes's upbringing. In a rare allusion to Hawthorne (in the same essay on Holmes) she ascribes to both Americans a "pathetic effort to mix the elements of his childhood with melancholy and beauty" (*Essays* 1: 294). With Mrs. Ramsay's death in *To The Lighthouse* she moved beyond the Victorian pessimism and sentimentality about childhood which characterized her mother's generation. But the more complex of Hawthorne's dramatizations of sin prefigure Woolf's demonizing psychology and her converse celebration of the child's anonymity and possibility. Both writers depict evil as overweening selfhood, an egocentrism which violates the boundaries and perspectives of another person. Dr. Bradshaw, like Dimmesdale's leech, Roger Chillingworth, forces the soul of Septimus Smith, causing the acutely sensitive, unfused man to destroy himself. Miss Kilman, a name worthy of Hawthorne, feeds on Elizabeth Dalloway with a greedy need which startles the girl at tea. Situating the Dalloway daughter in a jealous triangle, which pits her undetermined being between two grownups whose vicarious needs she is oblivious of, Woolf reveals the ugly struggle for power endemic to selfhood. That this disturbing reality grasps at the roots of even the detached, richly appreciative Mrs. Dalloway indicates Woolf's profound distrust of the adult ego. Thinking of Miss Kilman, Mrs. Dalloway reflects as her party begins that what one needs in middle age is hate, not love, to galvanize the self (*Mrs. Dalloway* 265–66), a sentiment reminiscent of Roger Chillingworth's demise. Torn from his object of revenge, the unhappy doctor, "like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun," leads the narrator to ponder "whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom" (*CE* 1: 260).

In *Jacob's Room* (1922) the suspense generated by incipience is like a Hawthorne mystery: the growing Jacob Flanders, who rarely speaks, is brooded over, scrutinized, and commented upon by the hovering narrator and other outsiders. Investing maturation itself with the sphinxlike qualities of Dimmesdale's dying or Wakefield's self-making venture (Weinstein 25), Woolf finally seals the secrets of Jacob's twenty-six years by premature death. Yet this culminating event, craftily withholding what youth's reckless imagination and perfect self-absorption might become, is conceived ironically—not as tragic waste but as escape from the closure and corruption of adulthood. That "the world of the adult made it hard to be an artist" is, as William Empson has said, a theme running throughout romantic and Victorian literature (260). Woolf's rendering of this idea, especially in the early *Voyage Out* (1915) and *Jacob's Room*, reflects the temperamental links between her pessimism and the nostalgic and escapist attitude of the 1890s epitomized by *Peter Pan*; or, *The Boy Who*

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*Would Not Grow Up* (1905).<sup>3</sup> When Virginia was ten, Sylvia Lewellyn Davies, the original Mrs. Darling, had spent part of her honeymoon in the Stephen home at St. Ives (*Passionate Apprentice* 46n). Barrie's charismatic, protective mother in the lamplit nursery foreshadows Mrs. Ramsay's perfect attunement to her children's moods at bedtime, the poignant moment before the dark hiatus of "Time Passes" steals all childhoods away.

Although Woolf, not Hawthorne, suffered from madness and committed suicide, the earlier writer seems less able to survive the loss of faith in perceptual innocence. If writing and marriage to Sophia were how Hawthorne opened an "intercourse with the world," Una's near fatal Roman illness closed the door on a broken man (Herbert 267). The childless Woolf, on the other hand, once she distanced herself from the protective illusions of Mrs. Ramsay, combined the survival of the virginal spinster artist, Lily Briscoe, with the adult perspectives fortifying James through Mr. Ramsay. Although as a feminist she knew Leslie Stephen's life precluded hers as a writer, she also believed that as professionals they were "in league together." While the late works—*The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1933), and *Between the Acts*—place the child in contexts calculated to show the fragility of the artistic potential, Woolf offers escape from selfhood in the passive recapitulation of undifferentiated moments of being. In the approach of death Woolf glimpses the dissolution of identity which congeals over a lifetime—a destination, or liberation, akin to her affirmations of divine childhood, those mystical, fluid moments when nature is first anonymously apprehended.

## Notes

Portions of this essay were originally published in "*The Magnetized Observer*": *Hawthorne's Romantic Vision*, an exhibition catalogue (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute; Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Library, 1988).

1. See, for example, U. C. Knoepflmacher, "The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37 (1983): 497-530; Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and Childhood Experience* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984); Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987); *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. James H. MacGavran (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991); James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Karen Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark Heberle, and Naomi Sokoloff (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994); 1993 MLA Session and volume on "Cross-Writing," *Children's Literature* 25, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher and Mitzi Myers (New Haven: Yale UP, forthcoming).

2. Quotations from Hawthorne's works are from the *Centenary Edition*, hereafter cited as *CE* with volume and page numbers.

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3. Barrie's play, a treat on her twenty-third birthday, Virginia Stephen found "imaginative & witty . . . but just too sentimental" (*Passionate Apprentice* 228). Likewise, she worried that reviewers would deem *To the Lighthouse* "sentimental" and "Victorian" (*Diary* 3: 107).

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