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APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF CHILDHOOD IN NARRATIVE. CROSSROADS, QUESTIONS AND EXCESSES

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Abstract || Over the last years, infancy has become a topic of particular interest in critical and theoretical studies of literature. However, little has been inquired about the different ways in which infancy emerges in narrative, and about infancy as a problem. The aim of this work is to examine different forms of considering both questions. The article reviews some theoretical approaches to these issues in order to: a) determine a possible categorical definition of infancy in narrative, b) discuss its literary specificity, and c) enable questions about the narrative work of infancy fictions in terms of the political dimension to each story.

Keywords || Infancy | Childhood | *Bildungsroman* | Narrative Voice | Political dimension

¿Será verdad que de niños vivimos la vida entera, de un sorbo, para repetirnos después estúpidamente, ciegamente, sin sentido alguno?
Ana María Matute. *Primera memoria*.

Que no se puede escapar de la infancia. Ni del pasado. Ni de las cosas que uno perdió. Al final la vida queda arrinconada en una frase, en una imagen que sigue dando vueltas sobre uno, hasta que uno decide desecharla, o reemplazarla.
Diego Erlan. *El amor nos destrozará*

0. Introduction

We will begin this investigation into childhood in narrative with a quotation:

En el extraño parvulario estuve, durante todo el curso, sentado en la maleta. No digo que no fuese el destino, pero ser era una auténtica maleta. No era una metáfora de maleta. [...] Antes de aprender a leer o a escribir, uno ya entendía la iconografía de la maleta. En casi todas las casas había una o varias maletas así. Ahora que lo pienso, la medida de una maleta viene a ser la de un niño al cuadrado. Pero nunca miré lo que había dentro de la maleta del extraño parvulario. Lo que tenía a mano, y no lo solté, fue una cartera escolar de plástico de color fucsia, casi fluorescente. Nunca nadie me pidió que la abriese. Un día lo hice yo. Tiré de la cremallera. No había nada dentro. (Rivas, 2012: 28)

This is a scene from childhood, a scene that challenges us and, as readers, makes us think about our own childhood. What can the adult narrator understand from the unexpected gesture by the child *he once was*? Which part of the adult's view on the child's experience becomes an insistence and reveals a fold in the text, which changes almost into a punctum?

These initial questions lead us to look at some evidence. Since the field of literary studies took an interest in the topic, the place of children and childhood as an object of critical enquiry has become permanently established. This could be because childhood appears to lend itself as an object to be addressed from multiple perspectives and multidisciplinary focuses. Social history, psycho-analysis, sociology, philosophy, didactics, pedagogy (and even intuition and common sense) are just some of the disciplines that seem to have "something to say" about it. However, at first, the problem of childhood in literature could be split into two sections. The first section deals with the issue of specificity. As the aforementioned disciplinary perspectives come together, is there anything that literature can say (and do) *specifically* about childhood as an emerging topic? The second section looks at the issue of figuration and whether the presence of children in a story facilitate the exploration in literary terms into something that is actually built on doxology and/or scientific discourse. These are two positions that would lead us to consider the dilemma of whether in literature, childhood is a challenge or a (re)affirmation (of what

childhood may represent in any given time and of its own making, in the same act).

In fact, the sense and justification for addressing childhood through narrative becomes apparent when faced with the evidence that seems to point to the fact that only in the form of a story does childhood appear to be conceivable. Each individual will try to create their own framework for their childhood by narrating a story created out of recognition (some of this can be seen at play in the quotation at the beginning). Nevertheless, given that childhood operates in the far corners of memory, it always shows its elusive condition. In this respect, and to counter the dilemma we posed previously, it could be suggested that all narratives dealing with the issue of childhood offer an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities of the literary task within the limits of a field which, initially, offers resistance.

Recognising this initial assertion, this article will look at what some analyses of childhood tell us about its nature and epistemic condition.¹ In order to do so, it would be useful to consider approaching this in terms of theoretical fictions of childhood (Link, 2014). Using the term “*ficciones teóricas*” makes us reflect on how we construct knowledge about something that is always elusive. In the same way, to speak of “*ficciones teóricas de infancia*” assumes that we accept such construction of knowledge as built around two central axes: the explanation of the processes that allow childhood to be understood as a device that produces feelings, and the transformation of childhood itself into fiction, as its enunciation suggests an unknown area about which the only viable statement would be an approximation.²

Once the initial coordinates for this work have been established, it is necessary to consider the interest for childhood in literature. We understand that, as a problem, the question refers particularly and directly to the issue of identity, or rather, of the construction of identities. What do the different aspects that con-figure *narrated* children tell us about how to understand an “adult”, a society, and a culture? If childhood is delineated as a founding moment in the narrative of every subjectivity, if it traces the individual’s introduction to the laws that transfer him or her from wildness to humanity, something in this passage should allow us to read how the human is understood and takes place. In sum, the perspective with which we consider the emergence of childhood in literature will affect the formulation of a particular mode of conceiving identity/ies .

For that reason, it is vital to define childhood right from the outset. What do we mean when we talk about childhood in narrative? A definition, a recurring starting point for any study. And yet, for everything that has been mentioned so far, that conceptualisation is elusive. Can a literature that depicts figures of children respond with any certainty

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1 | The different possible ways of approaching childhood presented in the following article are the product of theoretical and critical research from a doctoral study based on an investigation into a corpus comprising the works of three contemporary Spanish narrators: Juan José Millás, Manuel Rivas and Eduardo Mendicutti. This was carried out with the support of the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) (Project title: “*Ficciones de infancia y de familia en tres narradores españoles contemporáneos: Millás, Rivas y Mendicutti*”, under the direction of Dr. Germán Prósperi). A first version of this work was presented in the Third Colloquium of the Centro de Investigaciones Teórico-Literarias of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral. Many thanks to lecturers Marcelo Topuzian and Laura Scarano for their observations and generously reading of the first versions of this work.

2 | In this sense, it is important to consider Nicolás Rosa’s (2004: 57) comment that “*Nadie escribe su infancia en su infancia, siempre se la escribe —cuando se puede— en su vejez. El infante no puede escribir la infancia, porque no sabe nada de la infancia: es un saber imposible porque todavía no ha sido olvidado*”.

to the question of “what is childhood? The following sections will attempt to answer this question.

1. *Childhood*: genre

We thus posit that all tales of childhood, by the very nature of the material they deal with, proffer a definition of childhood while challenging it at the same time. It is that definition that we aim to grasp.

We will begin investigating the problem by looking at some genres that involve the textualization of childhood to evaluate how childhood is treated and analyse the possibility of finding the aforementioned definition within the genres. While this is by no means an exhaustive investigation, we will start by looking at two genres where childhood occupies the central role in terms of theme: *Childhood* or autobiography of childhood and the *Bildungsroman* or the coming-of-age novel.³ The implicit reason for looking at these genres is the greater probability of uncovering the definition we are looking for in texts where the issue is deliberately staged.

Childhood is situated in the crossroads between two large areas of conflict: the outer edges of the autobiographical and the textualisation of childhood memories. Rosalía Baena (2000) looks to the work of Richard Coe (1984) as a base for reading *Childhood*. Both authors suggest that *Childhood* “difiere de la autobiografía *standard* en que no es tanto un intento de contar la historia de una vida, como de recrear un yo autónomo, ya desaparecido” (Baena, 2000: 480). From this position, we are faced with two problems. On the one hand, is it possible to maintain the autonomy of the infant self and and certify its death while certifying the birth of an author? And on the other hand, what does *recreate* refer to? Does it not suggest considering the infant self as a smooth, clearly defined surface about which everything is known and from which it is possible to recover some elements on which to apply a series of rhetorical exercises? Baena’s characterisation of *Childhood* would suggest an affirmative response to these questions. However, as we scratch that smooth surface, the emerging postulation is nothing other than conventional. Therefore, to sum up, it could be said that the characteristic feature of *Childhood* may be precisely that of working beyond that impossibility. This means that stating some of the typified features when constructing the child figure would determine its emergence and its generic perpetuation.

We do not need to go further in this sense as Baena is explicit in that childhood autobiography tends to reproduce certain stereotypes relating to the figure of the child in order to work on them (for

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3 | We are aware that both genres would deserve particular attention, given the complexity of the problems that each one involves (including the generic definition itself). The object of its inclusion here is to show how part of the critics has approached these genres, which are made up of texts which work specifically with the figure of the child, to be able to consider to what extent they deal (or not) with childhood as a central role.

example the desire for knowledge and the discovery of language). In this way, the object of *Childhood* is the construction of a *me-as-a-child* (Coe), marking a change in perspective from the adult who is speaking. “Es por esto que los *Childhoods* terminan cuando el individuo entra en el mundo adulto [...] frecuentemente señalado por algún recurso narrativo que indique que ha finalizado la etapa de la infancia” (Baena, 2000: 481). For the genre, this is the central crux: “El *alcance*, es decir, la distancia temporal entre el momento narrado y el momento de narración [...] plantea problemas de identidad de si “yo soy realmente aquel niño” (Baena, 2000: 483).

So, the possible answer could be found by considering that “efectivamente soy aquel niño” in as far as this genre works on the basis of the pact behind all autobiographies, the correspondence between the narrator and an author’s name, and that the figure of a child created in the story is the fiction of the voice that speaks.⁴ Along these lines, “autobiografía de infancia” could be deemed to constitute an oxymoron. However, at the same time, this construction might be considered a response to the author’s objective to create a prototype of the self as a writer, with the intention to ground and/or explain, at different levels, his or her choices about what has taken place. That does not mean that the *Childhood* functions as an instruction manual for a piece of work. It will only impact on the figuration of the self that functions in the text and that the text itself helps to construct. In summary, we have not yet found a definition of childhood as a problem.

On the other hand, advancing further in our argument, Julio Premat (2014) identifies some viable methods to critically break down the possible ways of addressing childhood in writers’ autobiographies. He suggests three perspectives: the first favours the hypotheses of the biography; in the second, childhood functions as a mythical explanation of origins, and finally, the third has an emphasis on the ideas that bring childhood and the work of literature closer together. (2014: 2).

Baena’s understanding of childhood would fall wholly into the first of Premat’s perspectives, while barely touching the second. The third perspective would continue to be perhaps the area of uncertainty for any enquiry. In Premat’s research analysis of the works of several authors,⁵ childhood is a favoured place in terms of a writing laboratory, a key point being that it can act as an opening, ending, or turning point in an advanced or mature piece. What is interesting for our enquiry, however, is that the figure of the child on which the story is based is particularly important in Premat’s analysis, bearing in mind that “El pensamiento singular de los niños, visto por dispositivos de todo tipo, es un modo de aproximarse a las especificidades de la palabra literaria” (2014: 2) and at the same time, “la infancia [ises the place] en donde no sólo se puede tematizar la creación, sino

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4 | Perhaps this amount to take a step further and consider the *Childhood* in terms of the most useful category of auto-fiction.

5 | Premat works particularly with an approximation from this perspective in *Confieso que he vivido*, by Pablo Neruda; *Vivir para contarla*, by Gabriel García Márquez; *Antes que anochezca*, by Reinaldo Arenas; and *Cuadernos de infancia*, by Norah Lange, among others.

exponer los mecanismos elementales de la ficción: la mentira, la imitación, la fabulación deseante, el ensueño, el juego, la lectura. La infancia sería, entonces, el equivalente de la literatura” (2014: 4).

We see in this analysis that a theory where the figure of the child takes a central role creates conception about literature. The difficulty for us is explaining what could be referred to as “pensamiento singular de los niños”. Moreover, if the basic mechanisms of fiction which are best shown through stories of childhood are also typical and characteristic of stories of maturity, ultimately, this does not help to formulate a specification. Childhood and literature: we still do not have a definition.

Our search now comes to the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel. This is another genre that is particularly relevant for the analysis of the child figure in narrative. After an exhaustive analysis of the history of the genre and a critical investigation into the main theoretical perspectives, José Luis De Diego concludes by proposing a characterisation based on a series of features. For our enquiry, two of these are particularly interesting:

Digamos entonces que se trata de un tipo de novela: [...] b) en la que se narra el desarrollo de un personaje – generalmente un joven – a través de sucesivas experiencias que van afectando su posición ante sí mismo, y ante el mundo y las cosas; por ende, el héroe se transforma en un *principio estructurante* de la obra; c) que cumple – o busca cumplir – una función propedéutica, ya sea positiva – modelo a imitar – o negativa – modelo a rechazar –, independientemente de la mayor o menor presencia de la voz autoral. (1998: 7)

De Diego’s analysis emphasises the coming-of-age novel’s indirect relationship to an ideological programme. At the beginning, the difficulties the protagonist experiences in growing up point tacitly to the child’s moral conception and focus on the subject’s determined characteristics which will become “values”. However, the coming-of-age novel today, away from all efforts of didacticism, looks to trace a journey in the development of a protagonist for whom a determined set of circumstances, established for learning, reveal the intricacies of the social system in place and demonstrate the impact of those circumstances on how the subject views the world in the text.

For the purpose of our study, the machination of the classic coming-of-age novel is that in recounting the vicissitudes of childhood, the point of interest is not the comprehension or exploration of childhood. Rather, the focus is on the composition of an image which allows us to consider the effects of a certain path or journey through a person’s life, or an infantile voice in adulthood and its purpose in relation to a certain project.

From what we have seen up to this point, it is possible to see how addressing childhood as a *subject* in these genres, while able to offer a specific treatment it still eludes the question. Thus, it ultimately remits directly to adulthood, to the problems of forming the self as a subject in society and as a subject in the wider sense of the text and, at the same time, as part of a community that constructs traditions (aesthetic, literary, etc...). In a way, it would appear that the placement of the child figure or a child self in the story is particularly concerned with revealing a distance from the moment of enunciation by placing emphasis on the writing event.

In these cases, it is clear that placing a child figure in the scene, in narrative terms only highlights its absence. The child does not speak. The child is spoken about in order to speak about something else. As narratable material, childhood is not a problem for such stories. The act of *typifying* childhood functions for the purpose of investigating how the self is formed on a backdrop of society and culture. This approach is, however, insufficient in getting any closer to an answer about what childhood is and about the journey's conditions of possibility in the story of children through childhood.

2. Childhood: fantasy

The way that childhood avoids definition in those genres that deal with it as a subject creates an obstruction. By changing our perspective, we can side step this obstacle. This leads us to see that, in terms of narrative, the field of childhood materialises by constructing figures which, as they are thematised, can simultaneously a) show the mechanisms of their normalisation; b) provoke a disturbance when they represent nonconformity, through which the limits shaping the human emerge in its character.

Nevertheless, we are faced again with the conflict caused by the very definition of childhood. When literature is faced with this difficulty, it appears to choose to dismiss the problem, considering it an area that can be quickly comprehended, establishing it as the negative of adulthood – childhood is what adulthood is not.

This evasive otherness is eventually resolved by thinking of it as an Origin. But, by way of an explanation, it also fails if, while struggling to pin down a definition, it is considered that childhood, as “lo primigenio no significa una anterioridad histórica sino un primitivismo intemporal” (Premat, 2014: 6).

Along these lines, it is interesting to look at the contribution by Giorgio Agamben:

In terms of human infancy, experience is the simple difference between the human and the linguistic. The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant – this is experience. [...] But from the point where there is experience, where there is infancy, whose expropriation is the subject of language, then language appears as the place where experience must become truth. In other words infancy as Ur-limit in language emerges through constituting it as the site of truth [...] The ineffable is, in reality, infancy (1993: 50-51; emphasis in the original)

Further on, he states that “infancy is precisely the reverse engine, transforming pure pre-Babel language into human discourse, nature into history” (1993: 60).

The problem is working out what this uncertain place is; the place that constitutes the pre-linguistic, the “not yet linguistic”. If the child imposes a limit, if he or she traces a mark that points to the gap between the moment when the experience happened and the point when it is spoken about, how does literature convey the *infans*? How would we define the *infans* without trapping ourselves at a certain point in the metaphysical crossroads to which Agamben appears to lead us?⁶ How do we remove childhood from this place of ineffability by reading stories in which literature *does something* with or about childhood?

We could think of it as a triad, or rather, like an equation: child+story (language)+ X. The result would be childhood (which we have still been unable to define in terms of literature). The independent or unknown term alludes to that uncertain area where the child can be involved in and access its world, even without being able to speak.

We already know that the child discovers him or herself specularly. Lacan states:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (1977: 503)

Even before the separation of the symbolic and the imaginary, the *infans* is able to represent him or herself and we suspect there is something of that operation which grounds that leaf-over from which childhood is worked upon in literature.

If, later on, the child creates his or her own fiction as the protagonist in what Freud has called “the neurotic’s family romance”, and if in this act of fantasising and the results thereof it is possible to find “the factor which enables us to understand the nature of myths” (Freud,

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6 | “¿Cómo procede aquí Agamben? Primero afirma una destrucción radical; a continuación construye una trascendencia. Tal sería la matriz filosófica, el movimiento que estructura esta inquietud y este poder del pensamiento”. (Didi-Huberman, 2009: 59) In this sense, Didi-Huberman identifies a certain apocalyptic view in Agamben’s approach.

1959: 237), there can be no doubt that childhood and literature are mutually dependent for their definition.

In considering the child's act of fantasising, particularly during play, from the same perspective as Freud, it is particularly important to contemplate one of the ways in which childhood emerges in literature. Freud suggests:

You will not forget that the stress it lays on childhood memories in the writer's life – a stress which may perhaps seem puzzling— is ultimately derived from the assumption that a piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood. (1959: 153)

As we see here, it is this glimpse of early literature, represented by infantile fabulations, that, in principle, enable us to contemplate the journey from being an infant to being a child as two separate moments in his or her literary constitution. In turn, using Freud's citation, it would also be useful to reflect that some trace of childhood remains in *all* literary creations. Meanwhile, as we have seen up until this point, the figure of the infant in stories continues to reveal its evasive nature. However, we could consider that if the seed of a potential story exists in the specular formation that shapes the self ("the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form", in Lacan's aforementioned citation), we would find ourselves faced with the possibility of delineating an area bordering on the imaginary, which, as a hypothesis for this study, could be termed "the infantile". We will continue to look at this in further depth in the following section.

As the definition evades us, we will attend to *the infantile* as the object which literature is able to narrate about childhood.

3. Childhood: Voice

We look now for an analogy.⁷ Roland Barthes states that music cannot be defined unless is it predicated. He states that:

this epithet, to which we are constantly led by weakness or fascination [...] has an economic function: the predicate is always the bulwark with which the subject's imaginary protects itself from the loss which threatens it (1977: 179)

In the same way, by predicating it may be possible to come closer to defining childhood, which appears to be resisting definition.

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7 | Might it be that childhood can only be defined through *analogy*? While this possible hypothesis has come to light at this point in our work, we will not take it any further.

Barthes (1977), however, introduces the concept which allows us to leave the crossroads: the *grain* of the voice. Can the voice of childhood be recognised somehow in the text? Can the infantile be recognised as this grain that runs through the voice that narrates childhood?

Considering the infantile in terms of this analogy leads us to a field researched by Lyotard: the Aristotelian distinction between *lexis* and *phônè*. He wonders, how to differentiate *phônè* from sound? “Phone is affect insofar as it is the signal of itself” (Lyotard, 1991: 134).

Here we arrive at what is, for us, the key point. Continuing his analysis,⁸ Lyotard asserts:

¿La voz de quién es la *phônè*, nos preguntamos? [...] [Freud] Felicita al alumno [Ernst] por haber identificado a esa otra persona: es *das Infantile*, neutra, tercera persona. *In-fans*, eso tiene voz, pero no articula. No referencial e indirigida, la frase infantil es señal afectual, placer, dolor. (1990: 138-139)

In this sense, the infantile, “eso que tiene voz pero no articula”, will be located within the articulate voice, thus, in the adult voice. However, the nature of that voice is that it will stop being heard or become mute, always highlighting an absence. It is in this neutral and affectual place where we find the infantile. We are getting closer to the specificity for which we are searching. This issue of the articulated voice and the affectual voice proves that it is the auditory that is important. At some point, the *phônè* can become deafening. Lyotard suggests Blanchot’s concept of “narrative voice” to explain this:⁹ “La voz narrativa, articulada con tanto arte y belleza, es adecuada para ahogar la voz afectual, la vieja *phônè*” (1990: 147).

Blanchot (1969) suggests:

ella [the narrative voice] es siempre diferente de eso que la profiere, ella es la diferencia-indiferente que altera la voz personal. Llamémosla (por fantasía) espectral, fantasmal. No porque venga de ultratumba ni siquiera porque represente de una vez por todas alguna ausencia esencial, sino porque tiende siempre a ausentarse en quien la lleva consigo y también a borrarle a él mismo como centro, siendo por tanto neutra en el decisivo sentido de que no podría ser central, de que no crea centro, ni habla a partir de un centro, sino que, por el contrario, en último término impediría que la obra tuviese uno. (496)

Converted into the narrative voice, Lyotard’s *phônè* discovers a way of communicating in the now, of becoming present. In this way, the infantile can never be an Origin because the affectivity that comes through in the form of the narrative voice is always now.

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8 | During this seminar, Lyotard discusses the work of Freud in the case of the Rat Man.

9 | Judith Podlubne also uses this conceptualisation in her reading of the tales of *Viaje olvidado*, Silvina Ocampo’s first book.

However, as we consider this point, it is necessary to look at how the visual and the auditory are compatible for our argument. We have spoken of Lacan and the importance of specularity for the formation of the self, prior to the development of speech. We then referred to the infantile as a particular timbre that resides as a neutral and affectual place within the text. It would be interesting to reflect on this point using the example of Françoise Dolto and the discussion of Lacan's seminar "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real on how children need to know that ears exist and that they need to see ears in order to be able to speak.¹⁰ Lacan responds, "That is the imaginary" (2013: 50), and the place of the fragmented body in the formation of the self. In this sense, desire relating to the body, in a very archaic gesture, reveals in the narrative voice something of the cry that, early on, brought us closer to the density of corporeality itself, and through that, to the desired object.

"You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image, [...]: even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images" (Barthes, 1977: 36). Unable to see or hear oneself. I do not recognise my own voice when I hear it, yet I recognise its timbre. In the childhood story the same occurs: the narrative voice presents the *das Infantile* in which the place of the unsaid is recognised, yet the silence of which plays a role.

If in this place of play, the centre disappears, the infantile loses its characteristic of origin and takes on the mark of the present. For the infantile, there is no beginning; rather its emergence is a discovery resulting from what literature is able to uncover.

For the same reason, literature would become the place where the infantile emerges a space to explore literature's own character from a constituent distance. Moreover, this would not be the place to recover those stereotypical characteristics relating to a childhood which is seen as a chronological stage or period of life (infancy). Instead, the infantile would burst in unexpectedly as an imminence to be resolved as soon as it is able to be heard.

In the same way, we should also consider that the generic perspective fails in its approach to the infantile, as the infantile refuses to be categorised and / or typified. The infantile could emerge in all texts where it is possible to recognise the voice as working from the neutral. The Neutral that is revealed in the narrative voice, is suggested by Barthes as an ethical category and, in this way, the infantile would avoid to appear in the story as a moral dimension, and instead become an opening of meaning, "in order to erase the intolerable scar of the paraded meaning, of the oppressive meaning" (1977: 124).

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10 | In another text, Dolto herself emphasises this aspect. "Ese grito [the baby's] es para él el único sustituto de la compañía amada, el significante que lo traduce todo, necesidades y deseo. En efecto, es el *grito modulado* (el sentido de la modulación de los gritos de su bebé es "comprendido" por la madre) donde se origina la fijación del sujeto a su propio cuerpo individuado" (Dolto, 1981: 267; emphasis in the original).

There is something that we call childhood, which has an effect on us. Indefinable in appearance, it operates in literature through its actions, through “the infantile”; those features of the imaginary, which move through the text as a timbre of the voice, which cannot be caught but which can be heard.

We should evaluate the possibilities of thinking about the conditions and nature of the literary from the infantile, when what is at work is a process that makes words circulate on the foundations of difference. We suspect that *differing* becomes, perhaps, the act of meeting the infantile in the text and in this delayed appearance, literature is seen as that which returns with the “echo”.

4. (Ending-Opening) Childhood: the political aspect

In *Survivance des lucioles*, Didi-Huberman (2009), takes a scene from a letter written by Pier Paolo Passolini in 1941 as the transversal figure for his work. The scene where the fireflies appear in the darkness of the night shows this tiny being as a potential element for investigation into the formation of thought. The intermittence and nature of its lights tells of the resistance to that knowledge that resists from a minimal position against the destroying forces of great totalitarian discourses.

The image of the firefly, as depicted by Didi-Huberman, is, for us, a discovery. The author states that the fireflies would appear as “esas señales humanas de la inocencia, aniquiladas por la noche – o por la luz ‘feroz’ de los reflectores – del fascismo triunfante” (2009: 18).

This meeting of innocence and animality enables us to think about childhood in terms of a similar analogy.¹¹ The intermittent irradiation that invites primordial sexuality and its disappearance under the light of the great reflectors makes us think that childhood can also be a feature of thought in political terms.

Afirmar esto a partir del minúsculo ejemplo de las luciérnagas equivale a afirmar que, en nuestra *manera de imaginar* yace fundamentalmente una condición para nuestra *manera de hacer política*. La imaginación es política, eso es lo que hay que asumir. Recíprocamente, la política no puede prescindir, en uno u otro momento, de la facultad de imaginar. (46; emphasis in the original)

It could be suggested that the figure of the firefly summarises of all of the previous arguments: a remembered scene (the one from Rivas’ text from the beginning of this article) in which approaching the limits of the human is seen as an exit from any totalising order. “The infantile” would now be revealed as something that perseveres in the narrative, proving to be difficult to apprehend, emerging as

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11 | Links between childhood and animality might be considered from this idea by Gabriel Giorgi: “El animal [...] ha sido una matriz de alteridad, un mecanismo fundacional de clasificación y diferenciación jerárquica y política entre cuerpos, y al mismo tiempo una figura próxima y universal. El animal funcionó como el otro constitutivo” (2013: 9). What is the link between the child-as-unfolding and the animal-as-unfolding? Both demonstrate the conditions in which the human becomes readable. The animal figuration of the child allows the admission of the alterity and the reconsideration of what is understood as “familiar”. This is, however, a topic for a different piece of work.

luminescence in terms of development: a circulation of affectis which is impossible to pin down but which poses a resistance. This would be its political dimension. Rather than speaking of the construction of the child figure, for us it is useful to speak of “fulguraciones figurativas” (Didi-Huberman, 2009) of childhood. These would finally be revealed as a way of reading that stages an ambivalence through which its disappearance would also signal survival.

The image of the fireflies also brings another image to mind. In his 1961 “Preface” to *History of Madness*, Michel Foucault refers to the possibility of creating a “history of limits”. Later on he also refers to a “lighting flash decision [...] which separates the murmur of *dark insects* from the language of reason and the promises of time” (our emphasis). Significantly, madness and childhood come together at this point. Thinking about the emergence of childhood also means bringing to light the conditions that deliberately trace the border between the human and the non-human. Here, the dark insects “flash” and illuminate a decision, a decision that separates a constitutive silence and is transformed into a voice which is alterity (the knock of an empty school bag, for example), but which always points to its own. The small lights of the *infans* cause us to reflect on what a literary story says about its own condition as limit.

Finally, the line of enquiry proposed in this article leads us to some evidence. To start with, that the difficulty in reaching a definition of childhood through the essentialist route can be derived in the proof that childhood is conceived in literature for what it does rather than for what it can enunciate about itself.¹² The question about specificity is misleading for if childhood works by breaking down all totalitarianism of meaning, the result is that the question is taken apart. The power of childhood is exposed in the comings and goings that discuss the specific. If no paradigms of childhood exist, if every childhood is particular and unspecific in its particularity, that is the main and specific feature of its work in literature: the characteristic of allowing all presuppositions to be dismantled.¹³ And in this resides its political power: the effectiveness of imagining other possible worlds and making them feasible, not as another reality but as a conceivable way of intervening in the present (opening the bag and finding it is empty does not evoke what is missing, rather the nostalgia of the happiness of thinking about what it could have contained).

In this way, being revealed as an operation, it shows us an affectuality, which is proposed as resistance to the established ways. In the same way, thinking of childhood like this in a story leads us to recognise that these figurative flashes in literature represent a process of resistance in political as well as epistemic terms. The difficulty of grasping childhood in existential terms shows us its power to cause problems for essentialism. In this sense, it appears as a particularly

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12 | About this place of childhood as an impossible definition, Derrida's idea is useful: “an im-possible that is not merely impossible, that is not merely the opposite of possible, that is also the condition or chance of the possible. An im-possible that is the very experience of the possible. This means transforming the conception, or the experience, or the saying of the experience of the possible and the impossible” (2007: 452). Many thanks to Professor Analía Gerbaudo for this observation.

13 | A view with the emphasis on this path of mobile positions undoubtedly invites research into childhood from a *queer* perspective.

important place for the investigation into identities. Thinking along these lines, we could ask ourselves to what extent it is useful to continue holding on to an idea of “infancy” in terms of a homogenous position. If there is something that works in narrative¹⁴ in terms of affectivity as “the infantile”, and if we advance according to the political (what literature can do as an operation that shakes all conviction), we would need to ask whether there is “a” childhood. How would we, in this sense, consider the multiple variables that intersect the formation of childhood (genre, for example)? In each case, would a general way – more or less established – of being a child exist? Would there be dissident childhoods? And if, additionally, in line of the argument for this piece, childhood is not a beginning but rather a way of conceiving the unfolding of events, what are the effects of the infantile on each text? What does it tell us about the state of a culture in which they emerge and about a tradition? Working with a defined corpus of texts will account for the feasibility of a reading along these lines.

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14 | It would be different in the case of poetry which appears fully situated in the field of childhood. On this, Mallol states that, “en la poesía o en cierta poesía, el abordaje de la infancia más potente es aquel contempla el modo en que emerge en el poema en tanto espacio del deseo en su estado infante y de construir el deseo del poema como espacio que da lugar a una lengua infante (no domesticada)” (2012: 2). For this reason, the way that *infans* operates in narrative is different and we will look at this difference in the future.

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