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Looking Glasses and Neverlands

Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity
in Children's Literature

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CHAPTER ONE

How to Save Your Life

Lessons from a Runt Pig



When Fern Arable realizes that her father is headed out to the barn to kill a runt pig, she is immediately engulfed in identificatory existential angst: “‘But it’s unfair,’ cried Fern. ‘The pig couldn’t help being born small, could it? If *I* had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?’” (*Charlotte’s Web* [CW], 3). In a flash of horror and insight, she articulates the truth of Lacan’s assertion that all humans (and some pigs) are born prematurely, and she understands that it is the task of someone else to save their lives. Her appeals to justice indicate further just how ideologically overdetermined that task is for humans: We are not simply about practical considerations or survival of the species, we are about love and fathering and mothering, we are about the transcendence of a mere brute existence where weaklings are more trouble than they are worth. So in a supreme moment of fathering, John Arable makes his daughter a mother, and a runt pig begins his existence as Fern’s “baby,” Wilbur.

Written in 1952 by E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web* is a homely, comforting story about friendship. It is often, as noted by Perry Nodelman, the first “chapter” book adults choose to read to children; it has all the elements that make a story feel right for the very young—a main character with whom the child can identify, a wise and loving mother figure, villains that are not too fearful, and a triumphant story line, all woven together with gentle humor and carefully crafted language that emphasize the glories of the natural world. More than that, the story is empowering for the young child; it offers a vision of what most parents want for their children (and themselves) in that it can be read as a “consoling fantasy in which a small Everyman survives and triumphs over the pathos of being alone” (Griffith, 111).

Not only does Wilbur triumph over his fundamental isolation, but also he triumphs over the terror of his being-toward-death. He is saved not once, but twice, by women who act as mothers to him, and who use language to intervene in his destiny and to turn him into something that, by any objective standard, he should not be. In order to save Wilbur, first Fern and then Charlotte have to convince Mr. Arable and Farmer Zuckerman that Wilbur is worth saving, that he is more than simply a runt pig, good for nothing and a lot of trouble besides. The way they do that is by speaking for him, by connecting him to the world of language. In a sense, they do what the Lacanian (m)Other does—together, they provide the conditions for him to have a “voice,” at the expense of their own erasure.

The story of Fern, Wilbur, and Charlotte, then, is one of love, death, and the role of language in the formation and transformation of the self. Approaching it from the perspective of Lacan’s theory of the subject allows us to situate it in terms of its own preoccupations, for Lacan’s theory, like White’s tale, is informed by existentialist concerns regarding the relations between language, meaning, and being. This is not to say that Lacanian theory is existentialist. Rather it is *informed by* existentialism, but also by structuralism, two philosophies that are at some points radically irreconcilable. For instance, Laurence Gagnon’s Heideggerian reading of *Charlotte’s Web* centers on what he calls the characters’ “various personal struggles to live authentically” (Gagnon, 61). Wilbur and Charlotte “find themselves thrown into existence together, inescapably confronted with the task of truly becoming what they can be—even unto death” (63). At the heart of this type of reading of the human, there is an interior sort of “unique identity proper to oneself” (62) that must be found and cultivated. The words that appear in Charlotte’s web regarding Wilbur are read by Gagnon as temptations for the pig to live inauthentically—to be what Gagnon calls a “people-self,” one defined by what others have to say about him rather than what he somehow *is*, essentially. The only word that Gagnon finds appropriate to Wilbur’s true self is the word “humble”: “Only with the last, prophetic message is there a genuineness in Wilbur’s attitude—he has finally become more of himself, a humble pig” (65). But what Gagnon’s strictly existential reading does not take into account is the role of language in the creation of that self. Lacan’s particular blend of structuralism and existentialism dismantles the notion of an “authentic” self, relocating it as the subject of language; in fact, for Lacan, *the subject is the effect of language*, a concept that I shall explain further in what follows. But for Gagnon, the power of

language is descriptive rather than constitutive; Wilbur is under threat of inauthenticity because “[a]s a young pig, he does not have an especially strong personality” (65) and hence cannot ward off identifications that Gagnon sees as inappropriate or inaccurate. But if we see the subject as the end product of those identifications, as actively structured by them rather than merely corresponding to them or not, we see that the notion of the subject as an interiority seeking words that suit it is not tenable.

Certainly, the subject comes to invest its world with its own meanings, with what could be called in existentialist thought its own idiosyncratic “calls of concern.” Despite the fact that Fern and Charlotte speak for him and in many ways call him into being, Wilbur must develop his own projects; he must find ways to nominalize his idiosyncratic desires. Ultimately, he must approach his life, and his death, differently than does Charlotte or Fern. Nonetheless, there are laws that regulate those meanings, structures that contain and constrain the production of (meaning in) the subject. Those structures are not organic or idiosyncratic to the individual, as a sort of innate ego. Instead, they are located in language, which is a public order in which we always already find ourselves. The identifications that Gagnon condemns as temptations toward inauthenticity are in fact the necessary linguistic positings of the subject by the Other. This Other we understand in its multivalent dimensions: It encompasses the others that surround us as parents, siblings, teachers, and so on, as well as the societal structures, both formal and informal, that provide the racial, cultural, and gender markers through which we are defined. Wilbur teaches us that in order to develop any sort of self whatsoever, one must first be recognized by an Other in language, which implicates the Other, and the Other’s words, in the construction of the self. In fact, White’s story is exemplary of the ways in which language functions to constitute subjectivity in its structural dimension. It also offers us a way to look at the substantive aspects of a specifically modernist subjectivity. In what follows I will be looking at *Charlotte’s Web* through a Lacanian poetics that explores how “literature operates a magnetic pull on the reader because it is an allegory of the psyche’s fundamental structure” (Ragland-Sullivan, “Magnetism,” 381).

Fern Enjoys Her Symptom

The first two chapters of *Charlotte’s Web* are not really Charlotte’s story at all, nor are they Wilbur’s. They belong to an eight-year-old girl named Fern.

She is the “cause” of the story, so to speak, in that it is her dramatic reaction to her father’s intended action that brings Wilbur into existence in the first place. Without Fern, the runt pig is of no importance whatsoever. Interestingly enough, as a pig, he is not especially important to her either. He is simply a symbol with whom she narcissistically identifies. Her father, John Arable, exercises absolute authority over his pigs, just as he exercises absolute authority over his daughter. When he threatens the life of a small pig, Fern, a small girl, decides to challenge his authority. She does so in the way that is most threatening to the symbolic male power structure—she loses control and grabs her father’s, um, ax.¹ It is not so much that she cares about the life of this particular pig as it is her desire to impose her will, to be recognized as having a voice and a vote in the affairs of her world. Her father, although admonishing her to control herself, nevertheless reasserts his control over her by giving her more than she asks for. He turns her into something more than an object of his and his wife’s affection. It is a loving gesture, but one implicated in power nonetheless. John Arable is acting at this moment as the primordial Freudian father, exercising complete control over who may or may not acquire the phallus in his wee tribe. Significantly, Arable’s son, Avery, “heavily armed” with pretend versions of his father’s weapon (“an air rifle in one hand, a wooden dagger in the other” (CW, 4), is excluded from his father’s bequeathal of phallic authority. He is then and remains throughout the story (until the end, where he acts as Wilbur’s fool) a threat to Wilbur’s well-being, and Arable is not about to let him assume a role for which he is not yet ready.

Fern, on the other hand, has received her father’s authorization to mother the pig. In the confrontation between Fern’s desire and the Law of her Father, Wilbur is precipitated as an object. He is a narcissistic object-choice, according to Freud, who first defined this type of object-choice in his discussion of homosexuals, but who later integrated it into the stages of development of the ego. The narcissistic object “is chosen on the model of the little child or adolescent that the subject once was, while the subject identifies with the mother who used to take care of him” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 259). The pig is connected to Fern through the characteristics of smallness and dependency, and their positions under her father’s authority. Her father encourages the narcissistic connection, and hence helps to foster Fern’s psychic development, by emphasizing her role as mother: “I’ll let you start it on a bottle, like a baby” (CW, 3). The constitution of Wilbur as an object is crucial to the constitution of Fern as a subject. Together,

they form an Imaginary dyad, with Fern (presumably) replicating her own mother's desire when she herself was a narcissistic object for her mother. Hence the mother's desire is the first cause in the inauguration of the subject. But no less critical is the replication of that desire in the subject herself. For it is only when one stands on the side of the mother, so to speak, that one is able to pass through to the other side of the Lacanian mirror stage.

The mirror stage is probably the most well-known concept in Lacanian thought. The story goes as follows: At some point very early in the child's life, she looks into a mirror and apprehends the fact that her body is a distinct and coherent entity unto itself, that there are boundaries between what constitutes herself and what constitutes Other. Of course, this image is just that—an image, and an idealized image at that. The image has control of its body; the baby does not. The image is autonomous; the baby is “still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence” (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* [E], 2). Thereafter, however, the baby will be in a position to know him/herself, but only in a fictional way, because the Imaginary register of ideal images has come into being and has determined the only way in which we can know anything—through alienation (knowing oneself through an external image), duality (the result of a deep ambivalence caused by the alienation between the subject and its ideal image), and identification (the attempt to dissolve the subject into the ideal image and say, “This is me”). The baby has entered the world of signifying transactions, and image has displaced being; the subsequent and inevitable entry into language represents a further displacement or alienation, a further aphanisis, or fading, of the Real in favor of the Symbolic, by way of the Imaginary.

Of course, it would be disingenuous or naive to suggest that these transactions are not mediated—the apprehension of the image by the baby is probably never spontaneous, as it is almost always interpreted for the baby by someone else, usually the mother, who tells the baby what he is looking at. And until the baby can make the conceptual distinction of what “I” means and then identify himself with that “I,” the baby is not a full subject. Interestingly enough, children tend to learn the personal pronouns in the order “mine,” “me,” and then “I,” suggesting a grammatical progression from knowing what bounds them, to recognizing their object status, to finally assuming a subject position. Because the mother (or her surrogate) mediates the entire experience, because the child encounters first in her voice those shifters (“I” and “me”) that will come to stand for himself, it would

seem inevitable that the mother will always stand alongside any Symbolic representation the child makes for himself. And indeed this is the case—the Imaginary acts as a support for the Symbolic. Mothers and babies, under ideal circumstances, form an Imaginary couple, a unity that predisposes the child to look for such a couple relationship later in life, but also predisposes the child to form other Imaginary relationships, including the one between himself and the mirror. These Imaginary relationships are characterized by a complete coincidence of self and other, which is, of course, an illusion, but a necessary one. If for some reason a child does not make that initial Imaginary mirror-stage identification (as is suspected to be the case in some instances of autism—see Lefort), then it is impossible to enter into the Symbolic network of relations, with its substitutionary logic of the signifier. If on the other hand the Imaginary fusional relationship remains primary, the child’s relation to the Symbolic is compromised in ways that can result in neurosis or perversion. This is what worries Fern’s mother with regard to Wilbur. When Fern’s teacher asks her what the capital of Pennsylvania is, she is so locked in her dream of mothering that she says, “Wilbur,” which, in a sense, is appropriate, because Wilbur has filled up her entire psychic geography. Obviously, this is a potentially dangerous situation for Fern. But as it turns out, Fern’s mother’s fears are unfounded, because the necessary intervention of the third term has already begun to have its effect.

The “third term” in Lacanian theory is the position of the Law, or the Name of the Father—that which breaks the dyadic logic of the mother-child connection. Shoshana Felman explains:

The triangular structure, crucial to Lacan’s conception, is not the simple psychological triangle of love and rivalry, but a socio-symbolic structural positioning of the child in a complex constellation of alliance (family, elementary social cell) in which the combination of desire and a Law prohibiting desire is regulated, through a linguistic structure of exchange, into a repetitive process of replacement—of substitution—of symbolic objects (substitutes) of desire. (*Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, [JLAI], 104)

Just as Fern’s father mandates the mothering relationship between Fern and Wilbur, so he also mandates its termination. What breaks the dyadic relation between mother and child is the intervention of the Name of the Father. This third term effectively bars the mother’s desire, inaugurating a chain of substitutions that come to signify and replace the mother’s desire. Bruce

Fink points out that it doesn't matter whether you read "mother's desire" as the child's desire for the mother, the mother's desire for the child, or the whole thing in its totality (*The Lacanian Subject* [LS], 57). The point is that it is dangerous to the child and the mother, because it is built on an impossibility. In the dyad, there is an illusion of totality. But with the triangle of (maternal) desire, (paternal) law, and (child) subject comes a hole in the middle that continually needs, not filling up, but covering over as the child seeks to regain the unity with the mother that was always already lost. The substitution of signifiers for that desire inaugurates the subject as a *desiring being*, which is what is considered normal and healthy in modern subjectivity.

Thus the Name of the Father (alternately called the paternal metaphor or the phallus) separates the subject from the mother's desire by means of a sort of redundant prohibition—redundant because it prohibits that which doesn't really exist—that eventually serves to normativize the subject's desire. Fern's father requires Fern to sell Wilbur, thus effecting the initial separation. Seeing how much that separation will hurt Fern, her mother intervenes, suggesting that Fern sell him to an uncle who lives nearby. Farmer Zuckerman, Fern's uncle and hence once removed from her father, puts Wilbur in a pen with certain prohibitions: "Mr. Zuckerman did not allow her to take Wilbur out, and he did not allow her to get into the pigpen" (CW, 15–16). Still, he allows her to visit every day, which she does, causing her mother to worry that the prohibitions are not working to normativize Fern's desire. She consults Fern's doctor (whose depiction by illustrator Garth Williams bears an uncanny resemblance to Freud himself), who reassures her that the substitution will eventually take hold in the form of a boy, namely Henry Fussy. Of course by the end of the book it does in fact do just that, and Fern voluntarily separates herself from the moment of Wilbur's triumph in order to ride the Ferris wheel with Henry. Presumably, since Fern is only eight, Henry is merely the first in a series of signifiers for Fern's desire, indicating that she has been successfully triangulated (in other words, oedipalized) and is a full member of the Symbolic.

But it must not be forgotten that it is the psychic work performed through Wilbur that makes this happen. As the representational nexus of Fern's narcissism, her desire, and her relation to the Law, he cannot simply be sold and forgotten, no matter what a Symbolic authority says. Instead he is repressed. The lovely imagery that White provides is of Wilbur being put in the cellar of a barn where he becomes a Real pig, rather than an Imaginary baby. Repressed representations function in just that way. They take on the status

of the Real for the subject. The Real is one of the most difficult concepts to grasp in Lacan, much debated and little understood. It helps, I find, to consider the Real in two veins—a pre-Symbolic Real and a post-Symbolic Real of the subject (Fink, LS, 27). The pre-Symbolic Real is the subject's absolute Other. It is unsymbolizable and hence has no effect whatsoever on the subject as such. What does have effects is the post-Symbolic Real, that is, those repressed representations that create our material conditions.

For something to exist in the Real of the subject, it must be conceived of as having slipped the boundaries of symbolization. What we can conceive of symbolically is what makes up our reality, but implicit in that conception is the idea that since we have conceived it, and since we know that signifiers slide endlessly and substitute one for another in an endless chain, there must be some outside of signification where the sliding stops. Joan Copjec says it is the very duplicity of language that points to an outside which is the Real; hence the Real is an effect of language's inability to be self-identical (Copjec, 56). Bruce Fink phrases the same idea another way, positing “a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself. . . , that is, which is generated by the symbolic” (LS, 27). We have already seen how Wilbur-as-baby was generated by Fern's encounter with the Law; when he is excluded as a baby by that same Law, he has nowhere to go, structurally speaking, but into that register of the Real which is post-Symbolic. Repressed representations, in that they are unavailable to us, form independent relations among themselves and create material effects in our realities—take on the status of this post-Symbolic Real—just as Wilbur becomes a pig in the midst of other animals in Zuckerman's cellar / Fern's unconscious.

The story of Charlotte, then, can be read as Fern's symptom. Despite the fact that both Fern's father and her uncle have introduced a bar of separation between Fern and her Imaginary other, she still has work to do to effect her own separation from him. In fact she does not separate from Wilbur until Charlotte is certain that Wilbur is safe. When Wilbur's special award is announced, Charlotte “was sure at last that she had saved Wilbur's life, and she felt peaceful and contented” (CW, 153). Immediately, Fern asks for some money so that she can be off in search of Henry Fussy. Rather than join in the general excitement surrounding her pig, she insists on being allowed to leave, having no interest at all in sharing in the accolades of her surrogate child. Because we know the end of the story, how Fern is free to separate from Wilbur at his moment of triumph, we can retroac-

tively posit that when she sells Wilbur, she still fears for his life. And since we have seen how interconnected his life is with her coming into being as a subject, we can also posit that the entire story of Charlotte and her web is Fern's attempt to save herself. As long as she (and Wilbur) are not full subjects, they are under threat. The Imaginary is a wonderful place to visit, but the child subject mustn't continue to live there. At the same time, the sense of loss that would be generated by the death of Wilbur as Fern's Imaginary other would be too traumatic. Fern is at an impasse until Wilbur can be dialecticized, brought out of both an Imaginary relation and a Real that cannot be symbolized into a network of signifiers. Until that happens, or more precisely until Fern is sure of Wilbur's place in the Symbolic network, she is unable to break the Imaginary dyad that is holding them both in place. As a result, she develops a symptom. She unaccountably (to her mother at least) "hears" the voices of all the barnyard animals as they go about their business.

Charlotte's web-words function to dialecticize Wilbur and free Fern from her fixation and the symptom that results from it. Fixation indicates a trauma. In Fern's case, I think we can safely posit that the trauma of realizing that her father would kill a harmless creature in cold blood acted as the cause of her being unable to get over Wilbur, especially in light of her identification with him. Fern's connection to Wilbur and her subsequent symptom of believing that animals talk send her mother scurrying to the doctor, who says in effect that eventually Fern will find a substitute that will relieve her of her fixation. But in order to do that, the fixated object needs to be drawn into the dialectical movement of the signifier. Fern's father, her uncle, and Henry Fussy set the stage for this process to occur by excluding Fern's maternal desire and introducing a hole in the structure of Fern's relationship to Wilbur. But it is finally Charlotte who realizes that words are the way to unlock Wilbur from his position as Real object in Fern's unconscious (and, as such, unsymbolizable) and constitute him as a substitutable entity (that is, bring him into the Symbolic). Paradoxically, the words that "kill" him in the Real save his life symbolically for Fern. The words, by signifying Wilbur, free him from the kind of "authenticity" or Realness that he has come to embody for Fern, and that ultimately is a fantasy of the Imaginary. The words in Charlotte's web become "a Real manifestation of an Imaginary use of Symbolic-order language, whose 'first cause' is [Fern's] unconscious" (Ragland-Sullivan, "Magnetism," 405).

Some Pigs

Thus far we have looked at Wilbur as a part of Fern—her ego, or in Lacanian terms (as well as in the terms of Miss Piggy herself), her *moi*. But more can be learned about the construction of subjectivity by looking at Wilbur as a subject in his own right. Structurally speaking, Wilbur's emergence as a subject is fairly straightforward in Lacanian terms. The Lacanian subject is alienated from its own desire from its very inception. It is not Wilbur's desire that brings him into existence, but Fern's. None of us asks to be born; parental desire, in whatever form it may take, causes a child's presence in the world. And that desire continues to function in the child's life, creating the space in which the child will come to exist as a subject within language. Inasmuch as the child subject is caused by the desire of an Other, he or she is always already alienated. In fact, such alienation is the necessary condition for any subjectivity whatsoever. If Fern's desire had not been mobilized in Wilbur's direction, there would have been no Wilbur.

But Wilbur, like all subjects, doesn't immediately jump from nothingness into subjectivity. As I have pointed out, the first two chapters of the book don't belong to Wilbur, even though he is certainly there. But he is there as some *thing* to be loved, fed, talked about, and ultimately, sold. His continuing existence is not at all a surety. In fact, it is almost assuredly the case that unless something happens, he will remain ontologically questionable, filling a place in the world only until he is fat enough to fill a place, so to speak, in the Other. Alienation (understood in terms of Wilbur's existence as Fern's desire) has opened a space for him, but it is an empty space in terms of subjectivity. Wilbur has a thereness, but not a whoness. Gagnon says that Wilbur didn't have a "strong personality"; as a Lacanian subject, he has no pre-given personality at all. Fink points out that this empty space, this lack, is the "first guise" of the subject. "To qualify something as empty is to use a spatial metaphor implying that it could alternately be full," says Fink (LS, 52); that is, a runt pig now occupies a place that has been set aside in the Symbolic order for Wilbur to come to be as a full subject.

Fern chooses the proper name "Wilbur" as a signifier for the pig, because it is "the most beautiful name she could think of" (CW, 7). Already we can see alienation working—this name, connected in Fern's mind to absolute beauty, designates what her mother has called a "runt," her father has dismissed as a "weakling," and her brother has disparaged as a "miserable

thing . . . no bigger than a white rat” (4–5). Wilbur as Fern’s desire has completely annulled Wilbur as runt pig and has alienated him into the Symbolic order. Being has therefore been ruled out for Wilbur (thankfully so, because as a mere being, he would have been killed), and he has come into *existence*. But he is not a subject yet.

The next step in the constitution of the subject is separation. It starts with the recognition of a lack in the Other. Up until Fern sells Wilbur, he has lived under the illusion that the two of them are one, that Fern is the whole world. He follows her around, and when she is away he simply waits for her to come again so that he can follow her some more. She is his source of food, love, fun, happiness, and life itself. Under her care he has come to love the world. In one sense, we could say that the place he has been holding in the Symbolic is the space of her lack—he has covered over that lack and has produced the illusion of Fern as whole. Fern is “enchanted” by Wilbur, and Wilbur adores Fern. Williams’s illustrations emphasize this relationship; the gaze—of Wilbur at Fern and Fern at Wilbur—locks out the rest of the world. But when Fern is forced to sell Wilbur, to separate from him, her position as a barred subject within the Symbolic order is made plain. Here again, both the text and the illustration emphasize the separation of the two. Fern is shown on the other side of a fence (which is on the opposite page as well), and Wilbur does not even appear to notice her, being too engrossed in his food. What has happened is that Fern has been revealed as lacking, which is the same as saying that Fern has been revealed as a desiring being, not at all coextensive with Wilbur. While her status is much more privileged than his as yet, with regard to the Symbolic, she nonetheless suffers from a lack of power with respect to its structures of authority, which have shut her off from direct contact with Wilbur and have forced her exclusion from his development. He has been turned over to the forces of the paternal metaphor, to fill out his place in the Symbolic apart from Fern.

The intervention of the third term, the paternal metaphor, as discussed in the previous section, coincides with and is the necessary condition for Wilbur’s emergence into language. As long as Fern was able to speak for Wilbur, he had no need (and indeed no ability) to speak for himself. Fern’s loss (read here as the loss of Fern to Wilbur, as well as the loss of Wilbur to Fern) is thus potentially Wilbur’s gain. For Fern, the injunction to sell Wilbur institutes the Name of the Father, which bars the desire of the mother.

For Wilbur, it is the rule established by Homer Zuckerman that bars him from Fern and releases/forces him into the assumption of his place in language as a signifier. And while that signifier may well start out as something like “pork chops” for the Zuckermans, it is a signifier nonetheless and hence is open to contingency, substitution, displacement, and all the other operations of the signifier in the Symbolic order.

Significantly, Wilbur’s entry into language is preceded in the story by a rather long introduction to the barn in which he finds himself. In Nodelman’s discussion of the text, he points out that “the basic structural pattern in *Charlotte’s Web* is the list” (“Text,” 116). The lists encompass everything in the book; what the characters see, what they do, where they are, what they eat, what they plan, are all given to the reader in long, detailed lists. Nodelman asserts that the lists “not only evoke the qualities of barns but also imply the glorious wholeness of existence” (118). But the lists are noticeably absent in the first two chapters of the book. Nodelman notices that the first two chapters offer a vision of a “prelapsarian world, a paradise of innocence” (117). He suggests further that this paradise is a space of naive wish fulfillment. What better way to describe the mythologized place of the *infans*, the Lacanian infant before she enters into the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic? In this prelapsarian world, before the infant has “fallen” into language, it knows nothing of its own alienation. Here the child in its prelinguistic state is unself-differentiated, an “‘hommelette’—a little man and also like a broken egg spreading without hindrance in all directions” (Coward and Ellis, 101). The child has no impression of otherness. He assimilates everything, experiencing what Lacan has called “plenitude,” what Freud called the “oceanic self.” Lists in such a world would make no sense, precisely because lists imply differentiation, an acknowledgment of things which are not oneself and the placement of those things within a structure. Prior to its entry into language, the subject has to learn its own boundaries, what constitutes its own body and what constitutes Other. It must be expelled from its place in the mother, structurally speaking, which creates a hole in both. And though that expulsion is registered as a loss in the Lacanian economy, it also represents a gain—specifically, the gain of a place from which to speak.

The prelapsarian world of the infant is characterized by two registers: the pre-Symbolic Real and the Imaginary. The pre-Symbolic Real for the infant might be thought of as perceptual information without a subject to organize it. Ragland-Sullivan explains:

More primordial than the *je* (the social, speaking self), the Other is created by imprinting the outside world in networks of meaning made up of images, sounds, and effects. Such concrete elements, symbolized as mental representations, have the power to constitute the *source* of meaning only because the biological and psychic infant perceives reality directly from its birth. No ego is needed to accomplish such perception. (“Magnetism,” 383)

Certainly Wilbur is a perceiving being. The two lists that do appear in those first chapters (which Nodelman remarks are perceived as lists only retroactively, in light of what comes after—a nice parallel to the retroactive way any sort of analysis is projected onto this stage of infant development) are “evocations of sensuous detail” (Nodelman, 118) that seem coextensive with the baby pig. Kitchen smells are described right after the pig is brought in, and there is a description of the kind of mud Wilbur likes: “warm and moist and delightfully sticky and oozy” (CW, 11). These perceptions begin to get organized when the baby develops the capacity for mirror-stage identifications. The unity that the baby projects onto the image and identifies with himself provides the necessary fiction that holds the world together. But interestingly enough, as we have seen in the case of Wilbur, the subject himself is not the guarantor of the world’s cohesion; rather it is the Other. Wilbur’s world is initially put together, and held together, through Fern. Over the course of the book, there are other “ego ideal” representations that Wilbur tries to substitute for Fern, with the ultimate result that “through the identificatory and mimetic processes of introjection and projection, the *moi* is constituted from the Other” (Ragland-Sullivan, “Magnetism,” 383). We don’t have a single instant where Wilbur apprehends himself in any kind of mirror. This is just as well, because it clears up a common misunderstanding that the phenomenon of the mirror stage is an all-at-once, one-time event that takes place between a presubject and him- or herself. It is, instead, a process, and it may not involve a mirror at all but is rather the ability to identify oneself with an other, and *as* an other, that is, the ability to place oneself into the play of signification.

The play of signification that the child enters into when he separates fully from the mother is determined by the Symbolic order itself. Chapter 2 ends with Fern being forced to separate from Wilbur; chapter 3 begins with an extensive description of the barn, the new world they both must enter in order to stay together—the Symbolic. We know it is representative of the Symbolic because everything in it is distinct, separate, and located in

terms of a structure. Smells, seasons, housing for the different animals, and tools are all represented as collections. We also know it is part of the Symbolic because of its link to the Name of the Father: “And the whole thing was owned by Fern’s uncle, Mr. Homer L. Zuckerman” (CW, 14). It exists as an order apart from Wilbur in which he must nevertheless find his place. Hence White accomplishes temporally in his narrative what exists structurally for the subject—the existence of the Symbolic prior to and independent of any conscious ordering of it by any subject.

Though White presents the barn and its environs as a wondrous place indeed, Wilbur is not yet ready for it. The first two chapters that are rightfully Wilbur’s are called “Escape” and “Loneliness,” indicating how overwhelming and marked with loss the entry into the Symbolic is for the young child, because what is excluded in a very fundamental sense is the mother. Without Fern, Wilbur is not quite sure who he is or what to do with himself. His first reaction is to try to escape his predicament, but the cacophony of voices telling him what to do is too much for him, and he succumbs to the “old pail trick,” regressing into the kind of material comfort offered by the mother. Next he tries to fit in through assimilation—he becomes a maker of lists himself. He plans out his whole day, hour by hour, but then it rains. He is undone. “Friendless, dejected, and hungry, he threw himself down in the manure and sobbed” (CW, 31). It is clearly a time of crisis for Wilbur, a time when he must come to be something or other. He is faced with a choice—he can stay in the place assigned him as an object of Zuckerman’s demand, or he can come to be in the place of Fern’s and Charlotte’s desire.

There are four privileged objects in Lacan that relate the subject to the Other—the breast, the feces, the gaze, and the voice. The breast and the feces are on the side of demand, that is, they represent the time of the subject when he does not clearly differentiate himself as a desiring being apart from the Other. It should be noted that time here is structural as well as chronological, in that the subject often “retreats” to a relation of demand once desire has been established. To remain in this position always is the definition of obsessional neurosis for Lacan; the subject is locked in the position of always wondering what the Other wants of him and has no sense of what he may want apart from the Other. But basic appetites are taken care of in this position, and people can live this way, in a sort of infantilized position that ultimately leads to their complete consumption by the Other. This is the offer Zuckerman makes to Wilbur. He feeds him

warm, wonderful slops and gives him a nice manure pile to sleep in. But it is a trap, and to accept it blithely will lead to Wilbur's annihilation. It is better for him to enter the world of desire, where the privileged objects are the gaze (provided by Fern, who sits "quietly during the long afternoons, thinking and listening and watching Wilbur" (CW, 15), and of course, the voice: "You can imagine Wilbur's surprise when, out of the darkness, came a small voice he had never heard before. It sounded rather thin, but pleasant. 'Do you want a friend, Wilbur?' it said. 'I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you.'" (CW, 31). Hence Charlotte begins Wilbur's substantive development as a subject. Separate from his m(O)ther, empty in his own being, he needs some other structuring relationship to give his life meaning, and to help him achieve a place outside of Zuckerman's demand. Fern can't do this for him, for many reasons. Structurally speaking, as we have already noted, she must be excluded in her maternal function. The danger is, according to Lacan, that the mother's desire is like a crocodile; you never know when the jaws might clamp shut, so you insert a stone roller, the phallus, in her mouth to prevent her from shutting down on you (Fink, LS, 57). If we think of Fern as a human who presumably eats the bacon her mother fixes for breakfast (CW, 3), we see the metaphor is not an idle one in this case. But in addition, in her position in the Symbolic, Fern is ultimately ineffectual. Certainly she wins her argument with her father to save Wilbur's life initially, but White makes it clear that it is her father's love, and not the force of her argument, that wins the case. Wilbur is in need of a spokesperson whose relation to the phallus as language is a bit less tenuous. Fern had only the phallus loaned to her by her father. Charlotte, through her connection to language, through her ability to spin her own web, possesses her own version of the phallus. She is thus a phallic mother for Wilbur. She can provide the signifiers that cover over Wilbur's lack of being and firmly implant him as a subject in his own right in the Symbolic order.

In doing this she is continuing the work that Fern began when she treated Wilbur as what Nodelman calls a "'pretend' human being." Nodelman says of Wilbur in the barn: "He *is* a person, so it was silly indeed to treat him like a pretend person" ("Text," 125). Like Gagnon, Nodelman posits a "true" Wilbur to whom Fern and Charlotte must respond. But this is not the case in a Lacanian frame. The individual personality of the subject, those qualities that fill out the structures of his subjectivity, owes its very existence to the Other's language. Hence the substantive conditions of

subjectivity are time bound and culture specific, rather than atemporal and universal. Wilbur's concerns are largely modernist in composition. He is engulfed in existential angst regarding his death, his loneliness (his essential isolation), and the banality of his existence. He seeks intimacy, a person whom he can trust. He wants to know how to live. Such questions imply many things about the subject in modernity. They imply a sense of emptiness at the core of one's being. They imply a desire for unity and connectedness as a hedge against personal disintegration. And they imply a sense of choice in the way we deal with our angst.

White's "solutions" to Wilbur's problems also imply something about the modernist subject. Wilbur finds someone he can trust, and trust her he does. Charlotte proves to him that his trust is well founded, as she understands something about modernity herself. She understands the faith people have in the printed word. She understands that it is not enough to find personal meaning, but that in order to survive, you must prove yourself in ways that the world finds profitable. She understands the connection between the public self and the private one, and she understands the role and power of language in creating that self.

In a limited way, Fern understands these things too. Fern's treating Wilbur as a pretend person is never silly; it is the necessary precondition for his becoming a person. Similarly, Charlotte does not search for words that will describe the Wilbur that she somehow "finds." Rather, she chooses words, weaves them into her web, and expects Wilbur to embody, or, in other words, to perform them. It works wonderfully. When Charlotte decides to write the word "terrific" in her web, Wilbur at first objects:

"But Charlotte," said Wilbur, "I'm *not* terrific."

"That doesn't make a particle of difference," replied Charlotte. "Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print." (CW, 89)

When the web is finished, and people come to look at it, Wilbur really feels terrific, and Zuckerman confirms it: "There isn't a pig in the whole state that is as terrific as our pig" (96). What's more, Zuckerman improves Wilbur's circumstances in such a way that he waxes radiant. He becomes "a pig any man would be proud of" (114). Hence, in a very real way, Wilbur emerges as the effect of Charlotte's words.

Thus we see how the subject is an effect of language. If language can be said to have effects, then it must function in some way, that is, it must act rather than simply refer to something that already exists. Indeed, to under-

stand Lacan's notion of the subject in more than a superficial way, one must have a working knowledge of and commitment to language as essentially performative. In the view of critics like Gagnon and, to a lesser degree, Nodelman, language functions in what Shoshana Felman calls a traditional, cognitive way:

[L]anguage is an instrument for transmitting *truth*, that is, an instrument of knowledge, a means of *knowing* reality. Truth is a relation of perfect congruence between an utterance and its referent, and, in a general way, between language and the reality it represents. If it is not given to man to know truth in its totality, such absolute knowledge exists nonetheless in the word of God, in whose omniscience, indeed, language originates. Thus incarnating the authority of truth, God, or the "voice of heaven" (that is, the fact that God speaks), underwrites the authority of language as a cognitive instrument. In this view, the sole function reserved for language is the *constative* function: what is at stake in an utterance is its correspondence—to its real referent, that is, its truth or falsity. (*The Literary Speech Act* [LSA], 27)

In contrast to the constative view of language is the view that language is not about knowing, but about doing. Language is itself performative. Language has effects that are retroactively construed as knowledge—specifically, referential knowledge, knowledge of things as they exist in the world. Lacanian psychoanalysis, and runt pigs, show us that language does not simply refer but, as Felman adds, "makes itself part of what it refers to (without, however, being all that it refers to)" (77). Heidegger says "the person is no Thinglike and substantial Being" (*Being and Time* [BT], 73); Felman concludes: "The referent is no longer simply a preexisting *substance*, but an *act*, that is, a dynamic movement of modification of reality" (LSA, 77). Consider Wilbur: As a referent, he is no "substantial being," as Gagnon and Nodelman would have it, "but an *act*, . . . a dynamic movement in the modification of reality."

Charlotte saves Wilbur's life through the performance of speech acts. Indeed it could be said that she brings the Wilbur that comes to be known to the outside world into existence through speech acts. But what is significant is that these speech acts are never attributed to Charlotte. When Mr. Zuckerman explains to Mrs. Zuckerman the "miracle" that signifies to him that they have no ordinary pig, she replies, "Well . . . it seems to me you're a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary *spider*" (CW, 80). But Zuckerman insists that the words in the web are a sign from God, completely

referential with regard to Wilbur, and have nothing whatever to do with a spider. Zuckerman is here represented as actively repressing the possibility of a performative subjectivity, as well as the role of the Other in that performance. Considering his role as the Name of the Father, this move on his part is uniquely appropriate, in that it is part of his function in a patriarchal economy to delimit the possibilities of being, just as Mr. Arable decided who could mother a pig and who could not. A performative subjectivity, on the other hand, implies endless possibilities, constrained only by the unpredictable desire of the mother who channels the desire of the subject in the first place. Hence the production of subjectivity is to some degree out of his control. But Wilbur has two fine, strong, modernist mothers who offer no challenge to the authoritative role of Zuckerman, even as they subvert the natural order of things regarding the fate of runt pigs.

As for Wilbur himself, he becomes fully actualized as a subject when he becomes the “mother” of Charlotte’s babies. In so doing, he “traverses the fundamental fantasy.”

The traversing of fantasy involves the subject’s assumption of a new position with respect to the Other as language and the Other as desire. A move is made to invest or inhabit that which brought him or her into existence as split subject, to become that which *caused* him or her. (Fink, LS, 62)

The initial trauma that “caused” Wilbur’s existence was the fear of his imminent death. By taking responsibility for Charlotte’s children, Wilbur enters into a new relationship regarding death. He doesn’t exactly take responsibility for Charlotte’s death, but he inserts himself into it as her heir. Not only does he inherit her egg sac, but also he inherits her desire to help others, and to be a true friend. The very satisfying closure of the novel indicates a certain completeness in Wilbur’s development that the traversing of the fundamental fantasy suggests.

The Child Reader of *Charlotte’s Web*

Clearly, *Charlotte’s Web* serves a Lacanian poetics well in its allegorical representation of the development of subjectivity. But what remains to be discussed is whether or not such a poetics might have a transactional (or in our language, performative) component as well. That is, while a Lacanian poetics figures the text as a metaphor for the subject, it may also be the case that it is not merely metaphorical. I have argued that language has effects,

and that among those effects is the development of subjectivity itself, through the individual's assumption of the position ascribed to the subject in language (just as Wilbur became what Charlotte said he was). I have also argued that this process is ongoing, though it is most active in childhood, when the libidinal attachments of the subject are in the process of finding their preferred channels. Hence a Lacanian poetics specific to children's literature should take into account the relative lack of reification in the substance attaching to the structures of subjectivity. Perhaps even those very structures are less stable than psychoanalysis suggests: Just because the triangular structure of the Oedipus has held sway for so long does not necessarily mean that it will continue to do so in a less textually monolithic, more imagistically multivalent society. At any rate, however, a child in a literate society has a radically text-based subjectivity; print manifestations of the Other, as well as of Authority and the Law, are everywhere for the child, so it is quite natural for her to identify with them in relations of Imaginary fusion. Western culture has built its religious traditions, its academic traditions, and its popular culture all on the basis of the book. It should come as no surprise to think that we would construct our identities through the book as well. In that sense, books become our phallic mothers in much the same way Charlotte mothers Wilbur. They provide the signifiers that we perform. We use them in much the same way the infant uses the mirror image—to reflect back to us our own idealized image that we then identify with and attempt to become.²

White's rhetoric in the first two chapters is an invitation to the reader to do just that. Nodelman points out that White provides just enough detail to evoke a recognizable world and sets up a situation that will be recognizable and enjoyable for the young reader. "It is enjoyable because it describes a pleasurable fulfillment of common wishes: to have a real live doll to play with, to get your own way with your parents and feel the satisfaction of saving another creature's life in the bargain, always to be happy" ("Text," 122). But these wishes could be said to be generated in the reader by the text itself. All is dependent on the successful interpellation of the reader in an initial identification. Whereas the young reader might not immediately make an interspecies identification with a small pig who wakes up in a barn, he or she is invited to identify with a curious young girl. Nothing in the opening lines would serve to distance the reader from the scene—no physical description of Fern or her mother or their setting. Instead, the book opens with Fern asking a question, placing her in the same position as the reader

—a position of ignorance of what is about to happen. Once the reader has made that initial Imaginary fusion that covers over his own constitutive lack, Fern's concerns can become the reader's concerns in a process so seamless as to seem the other way around. She inaugurates the identificatory relationship with the pig through the characterization of him as very small and weak. Through both Fern and Wilbur, the reader's angst over her being-toward-death is first created and then relieved. Hence the reader is placed in a position to learn that the way to save your life is through the successful performance of speech acts.

The recent movie *Babe: A Little Pig Goes a Long Way* (based on the book by Dick King-Smith) produces a similar set of concerns and addresses them in similar ways. A young pig is separated from his mother, enters language—his first words in the film are in fact “Bye, Mom”—and is adopted by a wise and loving surrogate of a different species. The cast is a bit different—the threatening authoritative male is not the human male, but the dog, Rex, who supervises the activities of all the animals in the barnyard. But he, like Farmer Zuckerman, is also in charge of enforcing the status quo. When Babe and Ferdinand the duck attempt to steal the “mechanical rooster” and end up wrecking the Hoggetts' house, Rex delivers a long speech about how he was wrong to let people act as if they were something they were not. Ferdinand, for instance, knowing that humans eat “plump, attractive ducks,” endeavors to keep himself unnaturally thin, and searches for ways to make himself indispensable to the farmer so that he won't be killed. He tries to emulate the rooster, and when making eggs with the hens doesn't work, he takes to crowing in the morning. But his attempts to use meaningful, important language are thwarted—Mrs. Hoggett, finding Ferdinand's efforts annoying, buys an alarm clock, which precipitates the aforementioned crisis. Rex's solution is that everyone should stay in his or her “proper place” and be happy to do so. Obviously, he can proffer this command because the system works for him. But what is interesting is that Rex is disabled—he is nearly deaf and so cannot compete in the sheepdog trials, and later, he turns violent and must be sedated, so he can't work in the fields. His only saving grace is that he is a breeding dog; his position in the life of the farm is secured, quite literally, by the “phallic function.”

Despite Rex's attempt to keep the patriarchal order intact and everyone in his place, Babe's life is saved through the intervention of the new mother, who gives the pig a new identity; he becomes a sheep-pig. Language is crucial to his success. Unlike the dogs, who bite, chase, and growl, Babe uses

his words to establish a relationship with an older sheep and, with her help, to herd the sheep. Later, at the sheepdog trials, the sheep Babe has to herd won't talk to or listen to Babe, so Rex must humble himself to talk to the sheep in order to get their "password." When Babe chants this universal sheep call, the sheep become immediately receptive; they figure he is one of them because he knows their most sacred language. But more importantly in terms of this analysis, the farmer's language intervenes to actually save Babe's life. In the most crucial moment of the pig's existential angst, when he is ready to die because he has learned that pigs have no purpose but to be eaten, the farmer revives Babe by singing: "If I had words to make a day for you, I'd give you a morning, golden and true. I would make this day last for all time, then fill the night deep in moonshine." Words to make a day . . . words to craft an identity . . . words to save a life. The subject is constituted, again and again, in and through language.