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Citation Info

Greg Thomas, Review of Frances Presley and Peterjon Skelt, An Alphabet for Alina, (Hereford: Five Seasons Press, 2012), *Cambridge Literary Review*, v/8-9 (Lent, 2015), pp. 211-222.

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Greg Thomas

Review of Frances Presley and Peterjon Skelt, *An Alphabet for Alina*, (Hereford: Five Seasons Press, 2012)

> There is, in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee. Children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*.[1]

INTRODUCING *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, The Impossibility of Children's Literature* (1984), Jacqueline Rose argues that the imaginary reader implied by children's literature doesn't correspond to the innate qualities of any given child. Rather, it's a projection impressed upon the child who reads the book, with a sleight of hand uniquely available to the genre, as a set of qualities which they ought to possess already. The child is thus captive to adult assertions of their own character, an argument granted piquancy by Rose's subsequent account of Peter Pan's first appearance in fiction, in a story set within "a novel for adults", "told by the narrator to a little boy whom the narrator was trying to steal".[2]

Of course, we have to teach children something, and Rose's book perhaps seems a period piece in pre-emptively rejecting the idea that "what is for the good of the child could somehow be better defined".[3] But that's also because she is really interested in the motives behind the projection: what do adults want to believe about children, and why? Without glossing Rose's Freudian analysis, the broader argument is that we use children to embody an atavistic state of unmediated connectivity to truth and morality, in order to avoid acknowledging the contingency

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* Many thanks to Peterjon Skelt (peterjonskelt@btinternet.com) and Five Seasons Press for permission to use the images in this review; *M* (p. X), *S* (p. X) and *U* (p. X).

1 Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, The Impossibility of Children's Literature*, (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p.4.

2 *Ibid*, p.5.

3 *Ibid*, p.2.

of our identities upon the cultural, social and economic circumstances of our growth into them. And when we write 'for children', we are really shoring up this myth of ourselves: the idea that there's some residual part of our character which is immutable and steadfast in the way it makes sense of the world, morally, linguistically and perceptually. We are granted unique latitude to do so: if we used 'primitive cultures', or 'folk', to plug the same gap, we would be caught red-handed; when we objectify children, we are seen to be protecting them.

But what about when we write for adults as if we are writing for children (as Barrie wrote for the art and theatre markets, according to Rose)? I suppose we are entering into the same game, although the issue of the child's co-option is averted, and we are doing so more self-consciously, potentially to transfigure these myths rather than partake of them uncritically (as good children's literature surely does too). Frances Presley's *An Alphabet for Alina*, illustrated by Peterjon Skelt, is an alphabetic poem sequence gorgeously produced by Five Seasons Press, written primarily for adults, but as if for children. What it impresses upon the reader, in part, is that if childhood entails innocence, this condition doesn't abide in the core of our being but precedes our coming to be, and the coming to be, in tandem, of the world: a state of flux or play in which objects, bodies, selves, are amorphous and shifting; and in which Presley and Skelt revel.

The alphabet has been used throughout its history—as the child has been in the post-Emile culture posited by Rose—as a point of originary access to innate truths, deformed by co-option for everyday social use. Presley's afterword mentions Johanna Drucker's *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* (1995) as a source of inspiration, and from this book and elsewhere we can unearth a history of spiritual rubrics, from Gnosticism to Zaum, in which letters have been granted innate powers transcending linguistic mediation: oracular potencies; associations with different parts of the cosmos; colours and sensory associations. These are the contextless 'truths' to which language has access. Taken in this sense, the alphabetic sequence is the perfect vessel for children's literature, providing a reader with an unblemished capacity to imbibe truth with a linguistic

form which presents language's truth-giving capacities in the most direct possible way.

It seems a bit peevish to pick holes in these myths. Suffice to say, like the child—and as the tool by which the child comes to recognise the world and itself—language comes into being pre-emptively mediated by circumstance. The innocence of language, extending the metaphor, is not in abracadabra pendants but in the excesses of musical, visual, sensual and semantic association it yields up before it's fully pegged down to the task of ordering internal and external landscapes.

Presley dextrously teases out these associations from the systems by which language connects shape and sound, sound and meaning. This mostly involves a freewheeling play of speech effects which overlays thematic allusions both familiar and obscure, while casting a musical veneer over the sequence: as in the second and final stanza of the *L* poem (for "lemons", "logs", "loggerheads", "logicians", "logos"):

obvious lemons obfuscate girdles
fractious goodlands roster yurts
lost outcomes grieve ostriches
lines on green off
girls roll fierce yule[4]

Given the references to playground games and rhymes permeating the sequence, we might read "obvious lemons" as a permutation of 'oranges and lemons', and "girdles", besides suggesting feminine chastity, is a phonetic jumbling, or obfuscation, of "girls", a word which appears throughout the first verse, resurfacing in this one. "Goodlands" is a further shuffling of the g-l-s word sequence, while "yurts", via the implied echo of 'hurts', suggests loss, or "lost outcomes". This in turn might signify 'lost riches', but what we get is "ostriches", a word also feeding off the "ost" of "roster", above.

4 Frances Presley and Peterjon Skelt, *An Alphabet for Alina* (Hereford, Five Seasons, 2012), n.pag. No subsequent references will be given for this text.

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The *J* poem (for "jump") skips around in similar fashion, setting up an analogy between the child's habituation to language—formally enacted through a stumbling, skipping sound-pattern—and to the physical capacities and limits of her body:

j j jump up the wall
jump in the hay long jump
hoop jump jump -- ing off
the swing i taught myself how
to jump at height stretching my joi

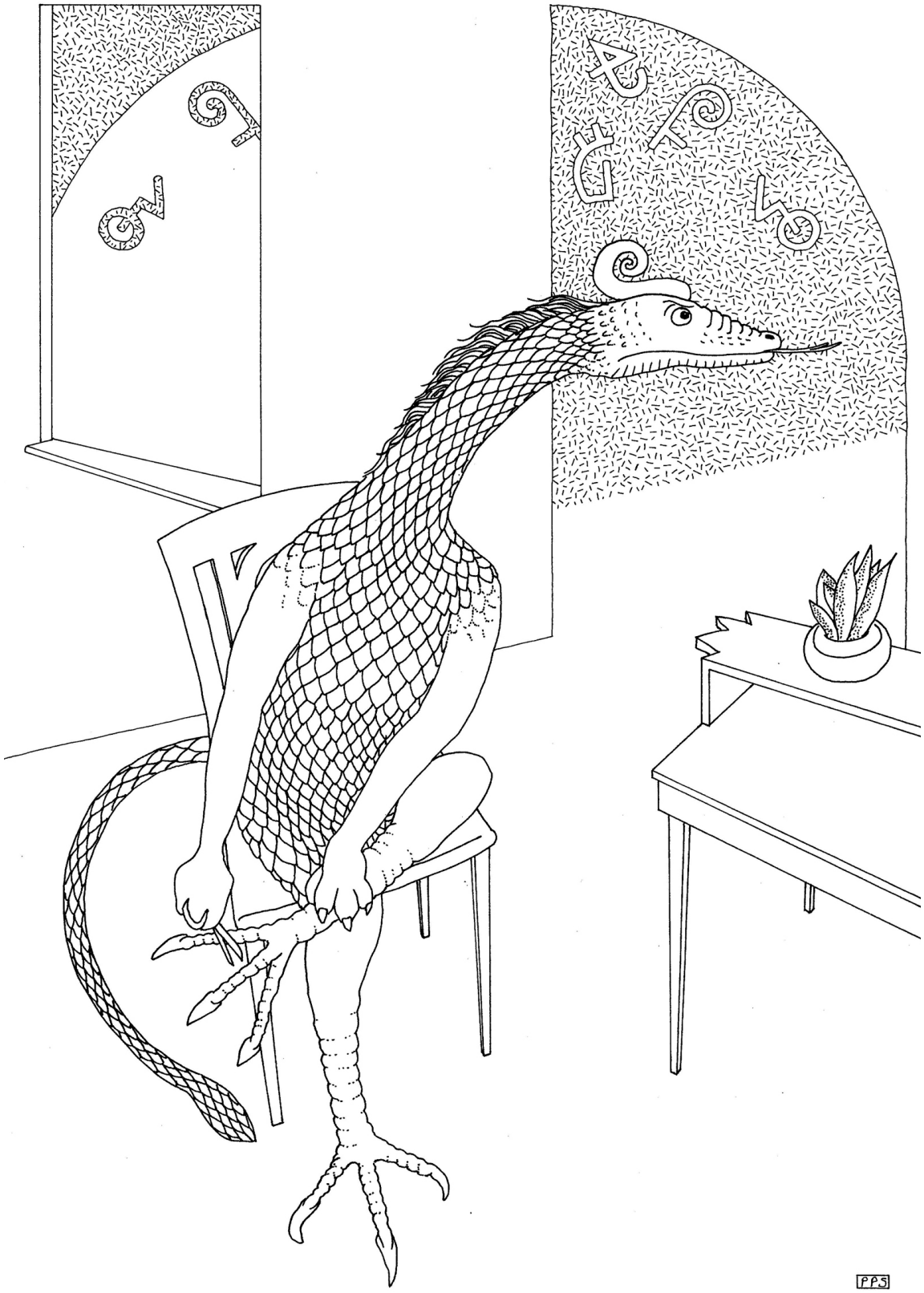
nts […]

What these poems suggest is the joyful excess of association accrued by sound prior to its complete mastery for semantic reference, but when enough semantic knowledge has been accrued for sounds to spark off ideas as well as more sounds.

The visual leap required to connect "joints", however, shows the poem at play visually as well as sonically; indeed, the whole sequence is as concerned with the excesses accrued by writing in conveying speech as speech in conveying meaning. The *S* poem (for "scripture, "slide", "sketch", "skeleton") invokes a myth of immaculate linguistic conception by allusion to Genesis, but seems already to have undone it through its infantile, exploratory spellings—"scr scri scripture"—and references to clutched fists and scratching, which present writing as an onerously learned physical task:

scr scri scripture
on the seventh day a
stub clutched in a fist to writ(e)
is to slot a nib his nibs to scr
atch or be soft as a scrubbing brush

Here and elsewhere, we also get written remainders of single-syllable words—"atch", "nts"—whose sounded-out value would be unclear,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suggesting the inaccuracy of written language in conveying spoken language, but also its potential to yield powers beyond phonetic transcription. Indeed "nibs" and "stubs" suggest cuneiform—styluses pressed into clay—and, through that route, the origins of the earliest writing systems in pictography. At this point, the connotations of the black and white line drawings accompanying each poem become significant. Made with a tool potentially turned to writing, some of Skelt's illustrations employ pseudo-orthographic motifs, suggesting a nexus between the two forms; his *S* picture (reproduced on page 214) shows a pair of hands clutching a Polaroid and pencil over a blank sheet of paper, apparently poised to reproduce the image: as image or language?

Poem and picture combined thus suggest language's capacity to meld with image, as does the *O* poem (for "on/off"), which alludes to the elementary cognitive grammar of binary code, but also the letter's aperture-like form, and possible origin in Egyptian eye hieroglyphs:

on off on off on off
switch wide as your eyes
turn on we are twins we are
binding we bit. […]

The *U* poem, incidentally, picks up the cuneiform connection, by reference to the Mušḫuššu dragon of Babylonian mythology (trimming his nails in Skelt's illustrations, opposite):

the Mush hush shu dragon is cutting
his talons they were his stylus
his cuneiform his nail writing
but could not carve his ur
name

The innocence of childhood in Presley's sequence is the impress of this linguistic play, not entailing a simpler, more truthful self, but a more amorphous self, feinting, dissolving and reforming in a collage of shapes, moods and locations. Skelt's illustrations are the perfect encapsulation

of this state of mind. They're not illustrations in the workaday sense; for the closest thing to that, turn to '*A* for "Apple"', though even here, comic-strip logic suggests the apple is being eaten backwards. Nor do they depict the vehicles of linguistic metaphor, like the visual forms of some of Apollinaire's calligrammes. They rather seem to correspond to Presley's free play of association, at times almost conceptually insoluble, showing what the poems show but overlaying those images with others whose provenance is unclear, or fading at their edges into meandering or converging lines. Pictures and scenes dissolve and reform, figure and ground shifting position, or broken up by abstract pattern. Presley's afterword mentions the influence of Dada and Surrealism, especially Ernst.

Set against this linguistic-pictorial play, some of the poems interrogate the kind of myths which would reduce language—and, by implication, childhood—to a state of immaculate clarity. The *B* and *F* poems—for "burning bush" and "foot"—pick apart stories about the divine incarnation of language, the latter referencing Io, the nymph turned heifer "supposed to have invented the alphabet by tracing the letters of her name in the dust with her hoof":[5]

> foot is her fooolling falter
> and halter the nymph made heifer
> traced with her hoof the two letters
> formed her name IO she has the gift an
> alphabet a voice in figures found her father

The myth of origin which would extricate linguistic meaning from the context of language's use seems undone in this case by reference to another mythical beast, Bayard, the talking horse of medieval romance who changes size to fit his rider, as language does for the user: "the foot will always find its rhythm// not the trailing heifer but/ the blind horse Bayard's fleet".

This is not to say that Presley's sequence repels the imposition of order onto the linguistic self. It's suffused with personal memories which

5 Frances Presley, 'Afterword', in Presley and Skelt, *An Alphabet for Alina*, n.pag.

suggest a mind taking shape in a particular social, geographical and familial context, the aforementioned photograph in the *S* poem probably depicting a youthful haunt: "Stone Hill just the birds singing". The meaning of words coheres especially around parental guidance, the M poem—for "mum"—threaded through with babbled approximations of a child's call to her mother: "m", "mur", "m", "um" :

m lying down is a vow
el a mur mur after a rhyth
m a sonority she curls across
the solfa short enough to wake
a space in her equi libri um

In Skelt's illustration, p. 220, an ajar door behind the sleeping figure on the "solfa"—a punning reference to the tonic sol-fa system—reveals a lush firmament of stars, as does the strip of image cut away at bottom-left, as if to suggest a passing away into space. The poems are written in memory of both Presley's parents.

The mother, like the father in the *D* poem, represents an elementary social context for the accrual of linguistic identity—"a mother tongue is a/ tale read to mum a bi-labial/ listener"—but not one invoked sternly or sardonically. It's interesting to consider how authority is encoded in language in Presley's sequence as compared to Ian Hamilton Finlay and Dave Paterson's *The Boy's Alphabet Book* (1976), to which Presley's openly responds. Finlay's alphabetic sequence is also punctuated with familial association:

S
Schooner
has a modern Bermudan sail on its mainmast.
The Bermudan sail is much lighter
than a sail with a gaff.[6]

6 Ian Hamilton Finlay and Dave Paterson, *The Boy's Alphabet Book* (Toronto: Coach House, 1976), n.pag.

Born in the Bahamas, Finlay's earliest memory, Alec Finlay notes, "was the aptly romantic image of his boyhood self on a boat, his father's schooner".[7] Paterson's photographic illustration shows a model schooner on an unbroken surface of water. But the connotations of Finlay's letters bind together the familial and the military, suggesting a linguistic identity shaped by a broader and more embattled complex of social and political allegiances, which must be accepted and defended, if necessary by force:

B
Battle fleets
are like families.[8]

Across the page is a fleet of toy battleships arranged in descending size, like siblings or board-game counters. The allusions to domestic family space only hone the point: children must accept and defend the cultural, social and political affiliations of their identity and language; their place in the order of things. As with lots of Finlay's work, the book's unsettling power lies in the ambivalence of tone with which this lesson is imparted.

The symbolic ordering of Presley's childhood universe is more ludic, and less forcefully imposed, lighter on full stops and the grammatical indicative. On this note, it might be worth acknowledging the terms of her distinction between this universe and Finlay's: "I was also conscious of creating an alphabet for girls, and it could have been called the 'Girls' Alphabet Book' as a response, for example, to Ian Hamilton Finlay's the 'Boys' Alphabet Book'."[9] Implicit in this gendered opposition is perhaps a pedagogical one: a sense that the development of the child's identity, its moral and intellectual sense, should be a matter of exploration and induction rather than imposition from an external

7 Alec Finlay, 'Introduction: Picking the Last Wild Flower', in Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections*, edited by Alec Finlay (California: University of California Press, 2012.), p. 6.
8 Finlay and Paterson, *The Boy's Alphabet Book*, n.pag.
9 Presley, 'Afterword', n.pag.

authority source: whereas Finlay assumes the voice of the teacher or parent imparting fact, Presley's voice is that of the child itself, collating and sifting experience. Accepting this inference—which may be far beyond what Presley's little aside intends—it's not clear whether presenting this mode of self-development or communication as especially suited to "Girls" essentialises female (and male) character, and if so, whether that essentialisation would be helpful or inhibiting to Presley's imagined girl-readers.

What is certainly true is that Presley does not evoke the kind of conditionless childhood perhaps inadvertently presented by Rose as the alternative to adult impositions of identity. Instead, we get a more nuanced picture of adult-child relationships, involving dialogue and empathy: the mother as "bi-labial listener" suggests, amongst other things, both speech (a consonant sounded with both lips) and attention to another's speech. Taken as a social microcosm, this image of familial relations perhaps even holds out for a world less conflicted than the one for which Finlay prepares his boys with toy guns and battleships.

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Greg Thomas is a British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, undertaking a project on politics in the life and art of Ian Hamilton Finlay. He also researches on the British concrete poetry movement. For a publications list see edinburgh.academia.edu/GregThomas