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# “On the Cusp”: Liminality and Adolescence in Arthur Slade’s *Dust*, Bill Richardson’s *After Hamelin*, and Kit Pearson’s *Awake and Dreaming*

DEBORAH WILLS AND AMY BRIGHT

ADOLESCENCE IS A THRESHOLD STATE, poised between categories, discourses, and definitions. It exists primarily between other conditions: between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy, inexperience and maturity. The ontology of adolescence is often contradictory: as scholars of children’s literature point out, it may be represented both as residually partaking of the purity of early childhood, idealized since Romanticism’s influential depiction of childhood as an uncorrupted “object of nostalgic worship” (Vloeberghs 71), and as contaminated by imminent adulthood, since in the process of development the young are “always already tainted” by their proximity to “the adult they are presumed to be opposite to” (Nodelman 7). North American social, cultural, and developmental narratives frequently suggest that the successful conclusion of adolescence lies primarily in moving through and past it; adolescents must always, as Alison Waller puts it, “move on: to their own home, to the next stage, away from childhood and towards adulthood” (29). Adolescence is thus represented as both transitional and transitory, a briefly liminal state meant to be resolved by a conclusive departure. The maturing adolescent must exchange his or her threshold status, defined chiefly by being simultaneously “no longer” and “not yet,” for the more settled, singular category of adulthood.

Three recent Canadian novels aimed at young adult readers, however, challenge the assumptions central to such developmental discourses. In Arthur Slade’s *Dust* (2001), Bill Richardson’s *After Hamelin* (2000), and Kit Pearson’s *Awake and Dreaming* (1996), the youthful protagonists find their identity and their greatest strength in their liminality. While their threshold status may be uncomfortable, it is also a position from which they may survive, and even triumph, as others in

their families or communities, locked into the less fluid categories of adult or child, cannot. The ambivalent status of the threshold-dweller therefore offers a peculiar potency. Forced into an initial helplessness in the material world, each of the three young protagonists becomes adept at refuting the restrictive boundaries of the real and entering instead the unbounded spaces of what we might call the transliminal consciousness. By this we mean a state of mind that moves fluidly across the divide between different states of awareness, such as waking or sleeping, the alert or the hallucinatory, the quotidian or the fantastic, the analytical or the dream-like, states typically understood in the tradition of Western metaphysics as distinct, even mutually exclusive. The transliminal consciousness thus offers a uniquely permeable locus of the fantastic and the mimetic, a kind of neither/nor territory. *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* all feature young protagonists who move between a recognizable waking world and an alien, fantastical dream-state which they must navigate in order to rescue lost siblings or dream into being new siblings; they use the creative and generative potential of the dream-space to either create a coherent family or preserve a fragmented family. In accomplishing this, Robert, Penelope, and Theo are depicted as at once more wildly, exuberantly, and transgressively imaginative and more grounded, serious, and responsible than the adults of their community, who not only do not undertake the corrective or restorative journeys that they leave to the three young characters, but largely fail to recognize or value the imaginative border-crossing central to such journeys. In contrast to the adults surrounding Robert, Penelope, and Theo, these novels value transliminal fluidity, as reflected in the way they define the maturation of their central adolescent characters. They differ provocatively in their representation of development from novels for young adult readers that are organized around a singular threshold which, in its crossing, irreversibly propels the adolescent into maturity. Instead, the adolescent characters in *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* may move “forward” into adulthood as required by circumstance (in order, for example, to call forth the resolution to face a confrontation) but may also shift “backward” into childhood in order to draw upon childhood’s notional qualities. In these novels, it is not the qualities conventionally associated with adulthood that precipitate their protagonists’ unconventional maturation, but those that have been, since the Romantics re-envisioned the child as natur-

ally imbued with “spontaneity,” “purity” and “joy,” linked explicitly to childhood (Postman 59; Richardson 33). Childhood’s notional sense of wonder, openness to improbability, and untrammelled imagination all allow, in these texts, the adolescent heroes to outwit both natural and supernatural antagonists. While the novels’ realistically minded adults, bound to the quotidian, familiar, and mundane, try to establish a firmly bounded reality and reject as impossible fictions all fantastical intrusions into their familiar worlds, the adolescent protagonists are able to deftly move between the ontologically contradictory states of fantasy and reality. In each of these novels, then, the successful adolescents are represented as marked not only by their open, receptive imaginations, but also by their ability to privilege imaginative over logical or consensual truths. This ability endows the three young heroes with a peculiar awareness of the world, a state of mind that, even in the face of rational denial, can enter, move deftly between, and even create alternative realities. Their characteristic and defining transliminal consciousness may be unsettling but it is also salvational. Significantly, in these novels, such consciousness is ultimately accessible only to those willing to exist in a mixed or, to borrow a term from Richardson’s malevolent Pied Piper, a “pied” state, one that, to destructive or constructive ends, can combine the contradictory into a new, multifarious, even motley reality.

This article will examine the revaluation of adolescent liminality in *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming*, especially in the way it differs from the stringent linearity of more common models for framing adolescence. Developmental psychology, for example, as Lamb and Bornstein summarize, defines discrete stages of cognitive, maturational, and psychological progression that occur sequentially through categories of childhood, late/early adolescence, and adulthood. Developmental biology presents a similar model; as current texts such as Scott F. Gilbert’s define it, progression through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is recognized when individuals serially exhibit the biological characteristics representative of each category. These developmental models emphasize a clear linear movement between stages, where adolescence occurs after childhood and before adulthood.

While *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* have not attracted sustained scholarly attention, taken together they suggest a new way to consider the transitionality that developmental discourses have posited as central to adolescence, and they offer an intriguing

new framing of the adolescent protagonist as grounded in a distinct, transliminal consciousness. This state depends upon an enlarged and interstitial awareness, something portrayed as unique to the adolescent protagonists, and through it these novels sketch a less impermeable, more malleable line between childhood and adulthood than that of the developmentalist paradigm that is often implicit in academic models and cultural representations — those two discursive strands that together, as Rex and Wendy Stainton-Rogers suggest, cumulatively comprise “re-presentations of children” (193). Models of both developmental psychology and developmental biology imply that childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are distinct and discrete states of progression. However, literary representations of adolescence may reveal a greater fluidity between the boundaries of these developmental stages. In the case of these three novels, adolescents are shown to retain the sensibilities of childhood even as they transition into adolescence, although traditional models of development suggest that a rejection of childhood constitutes the central, and perhaps the only, means of “growing up.” While these adolescents take on “adult” roles to overcome conflict, they also demonstrate that it is their intrinsic connection to childhood experience that allows them to succeed. In this way, the boundaries between stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood become less clear. Rather than emphasizing adolescence as a portal or pathway leading directly and irrevocably from childhood into adulthood, *Dust*, *After Hamelin* and *Awake and Dreaming* offer a more complex model of transition, one which is not unilateral and linear but bilateral and multidirectional.

This bilaterality of movement is reflected in the novels’ representations of their adolescent protagonists’ physical as well as maturational journeys, which involve a more complex progression than a story of straightforward movement from a familiar home place to an alien space. *Awake and Dreaming*, set in Vancouver and Victoria, and *Dust*, which takes place on the Saskatchewan prairie, represent uniquely Canadian geographies. In these novels, place comes to signal home for their young protagonists: Theo’s contentment in finding a home in Victoria and Robert’s profound affinity with the prairie landscape reveal important connections to home spaces. However, Theo and Robert must leave home, or homestead, in order to encounter their primary conflict. This echoes the argument of recent scholarship by Mavis Reimer, who notes that writing about home is a central thematic trope in Canadian

children's literature. Reimer states, "The most valued story in English-language Canadian children's literature is a narrative in which the central child character, pushed out of an originary home by the decisions or behavior of powerful adults, journeys to an alien place and, after a series of vicissitudes that occupy most of the tale, chooses to claim the unfamiliar space as a new home" (1). Like *Awake and Dreaming* and *Dust, After Hamelin* confirms Reimer's projected structure of departure: young Penelope must leave home because her absence becomes necessary in order to ensure the restitution of the rest of the community. While reflecting Reimer's observations concerning the importance of home and its departure in Canadian children's literature, however, Pearson's, Slade's, and Richardson's novels stop short of identifying with the structures that resist a cyclical return to the lost, originary home. The young heroes of the novels Reimer analyses, which include Jan Truss's *Jasmin* (1982), Michael Bedard's *Redwork* (1990), Julie Johnson's *Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me* (1994), Don Aker's *Of Things Not Seen* (1995), and Tim Wynne-Jones's *The Maestro* (1995), for the most part "choose not to live with their 'natural' families in their given homes at the conclusion of their stories; rather, they find or accept other bonds with adults and children with whom they feel 'at home'" (Reimer 8). In contrast, in *Awake and Dreaming*, *Dust*, and *After Hamelin*, the youthful protagonists do not choose to claim an unfamiliar space as their new home, but insist instead on returning to their originary situation once they have faced their various ordeals or conflicts. While they bring important skills or affects of the unfamiliar spaces back with them, they do not invest any further in the alien places to which they travel, but transport their skills back with them to improve and preserve their existing homes upon their return. The structure of leaving home, or homestead, in *Awake and Dreaming*, *Dust*, and *After Hamelin* therefore reaffirms an important feature of Canadian children's literature as identified by Reimer, yet also interrogates the trope through their protagonists' choice to journey back to a reconstituted home and away from the unfamiliar place. These three novels thus both reflect and complicate the conceptions of departure and return identified by contemporary Canadian scholars.

It is through occupying a threshold position of multiple landscapes and multiple liminalities that the three young protagonists of *Dust, After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* succeed in surviving their encoun-

ters with supernatural revenants like Harsich, the sinister rain maker; Cecily Stone, the ghost writer; and the magical child-thief, the Pied Piper — figures who, resisting containment in ontologically other states of being, embody in their invasion of the quotidian a gothic return of the exiled and alien. The young characters' liminality provides them with power unavailable to adults of closed or categorical imagination, especially those who try to control or contain the adolescent's expansive consciousness. The protagonists' liminal state is initially emphasized by the striking ambivalence surrounding their ages relative to their responsibilities. Biologically, the three key characters are barely or not yet adolescent, a stage that broadly stretches over the years between ten and twenty; *Dust's* Robert and *After Hamelin's* Penelope are eleven, and *Awake and Dreaming's* Theo is only nine. The physical changes of pubescence that are often crucially important in realistic young adult fiction, such as bodily changes and the awakening of sexual desire, are not explicitly addressed by the narratives; Theo, for example, is concerned about her rapid physical growth primarily in that it poses the problem of outgrowing her clothes and shoes when she cannot afford to purchase new ones. Penelope makes affectionate jokes about her older sister's recently burgeoning breasts, and seems confidently unconcerned with her own body and its physical development or lack thereof. Robert's parents are suspicious of the amount of time he spends alone in his room, but it is only because he is secretly reading the sensational novels they abhor and distrust; other possible reasons for his solitude remain unaddressed, since Robert is far more caught up in the life of the imagination than of the body. Despite this lack of emphasis on physical maturation, the novels treat the characters as adolescent by insisting on their threshold status: as the ageless predator Harsich says to Robert Steelgate in *Dust*, "You are on the cusp," between "boy and man, the dreaming and reality" (118). Penelope, too, opens her story on a cusp, the eve of the "elevening" ceremony that will formally conclude her girlhood and will bring her the gift of Deep Dreaming: "It was the day you waited for all your young life. The beginning of your life as a woman" (Richardson 11). While not yet teenagers, both characters are cast as standing on the brink of personal and cultural maturity, the chief social marker of adolescence. Theo's age is also made deliberately ambiguous: other characters repeatedly misjudge it, seeing her as either older or younger than her years. Her mother treats her as already autonomous,

leaving her alone for days at a time and impatiently telling her she is old enough to look after herself. The ambiguity of Theo's age is uncomfortably highlighted in a scene in which her mother forces her to dance on the street while she panhandles. When Theo was much younger, she reflects, people gave more money, but now she is a spectacle from whom passers-by shy away. Her physical awkwardness, embarrassment, and the inappropriately short, outgrown dress she is forced to wear suggest that the witnessing adults see a subtext of sexuality in the scene that Theo intuits but does not yet fully understand. In order to leave the painful spectacle of her body behind, she escapes by unmooring her awareness from surrounding reality and retreating into the powerful daydreams of belonging that eventually reify the imaginary family of whom she dreams.

Poised provocatively between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy, waking and dreaming, the falsely oppositional binaries created by the rational world, Robert, Penelope, and Theo find that their ability to refute or shift these binaries enables them to face both their material challenges and their supernatural confrontations. The novels' fantastic iconography emblemizes the interstitiality of youth in the form of dreaming. Dreaming is portrayed as a mystical site of the "between-ness" that the texts depict as something to be valued, cultivated, and preserved, rather than as a mere transitional pause on the way to something more real, definite, or permanent. Each protagonist is emphatically positioned on the cusp of experience, at once keenly aware of material and social difficulties such as poverty, hunger, alienation, and loss, and intensely receptive to fantastic incursions into this burdened quotidian reality. Their liminality affords them greater mobility than others whose state is more fixed. Their cusp status allows Robert, Penelope, and Theo to negotiate the supernatural encounters that thwart both the adults and the younger children around them. Their interstitial imaginations and transliminal consciousness, nurtured by the fantastical dreaming disdained by others, enable them to not only survive the spectral encounter but to rescue their threatened family or community. Adolescence is thus not represented as something to be resolved by a definitive crossing into adulthood but rather shaped by the understanding that, even on the road to maturation, thresholds may be crossed in both directions.



In their redrawing of the familiar line between childhood and adulthood, these novels reflect some of the key points at play in a larger critical conversation about narrative patterns in literature intended for adolescents as opposed to that intended for children. Many critics have observed that children's literature commonly employs a circular narrative pattern, in which stories of departure ultimately culminate in return. It is worth reflecting on this pattern in order to understand how it contrasts with the pattern that tends to dominate fiction for young adults, in which narrative structures "depart from childhood patterns of circularity and instead share common ground with developmental theories and frameworks of progression" (Waller 29). Within the circular pattern of children's fiction, although the reversion may take varied forms, the return is fundamental: the child protagonist leaves or is taken from, but finally regains, the safety of the starting point. In identifying several narrative patterns in children's fantasy literature, Maria Nikolajeva suggests that the circular narrative pattern is both common and "natural" in children's fiction, since a happy ending usually requires that "child characters return to their own safe home" (42). Similarly, Sarah Gilead postulates that the familiarity and "simple aesthetics" of the circular model of return, with its satisfying neatness and structural parallelism, are enough to reassure the reader unsettled by the encounter with the fantastic or supernatural (81). As the child-protagonist's world reverts from the transitory uncertainties of the alien back to the solidity of the known and the real, the circularity of the structure "completes a frame around the fantasy"; the frame re-establishes and endorses the "reality" of the text's opening, the safe, known world of home (81). Moreover, this reassurance can override the ontological questions raised by the textual proximity of the fantastical or supernatural to the real: the text is "settled" back within the familiar as the child character settles back into his or her home.

This model of circularity and return is not the only one found in children's literature, of course: just as definitions of childhood are at once culturally complex and contested, so the narrative structures of children's literature reflect recurrent ambiguities and ambivalence. Scholars of children's literature have acknowledged and addressed this complexity in a range of ways. In her controversial polemic *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose supports but complicates the reading of circularity. Rose suggests that children's literature does seek to estab-

lish the safety of home in order to both begin and restoratively conclude most narratives, but also suggests that this safety may be problematic. Rose argues that while the familiar children's narrative trope of circularity offers security, it may also, more ominously, secure the child, creating a colonized, even abused identity. This role is dependent on cultural consensus concerning the security and rigidity of the division between childhood and adulthood, and reinforced by the notion that writers for young children must never challenge such "psychic barriers," the "most important of which is the barrier between adult and child" (70). For Rose, "in the case of children's fiction, the question of form turns into a question of limits, . . . of how far the narrator can go before he or she loses his or her identity, and hence the right to speak, or write, for a child. Writing for children rests on that limit" (70). There is, for Rose, something potentially transgressive in an adult writer for children treading too closely to or wandering across the "limit," the definitive line between adult and child. Further, the practical necessity in children's literature of an adult writer's voice speaking both to the child reader and, in first-person narrative, speaking for and as the child, results in a lack of what Rose calls cohesiveness, a term which seems to carry as much moral as formal weight. When children's literature comes too close to or even "touches on" the barrier between child and adult, it becomes for Rose not a formal "experiment" but an ethical transgression, even a figurative "*molestation*" (70, italics in original). In Rose's reading, then, we are by implication invited to reconsider the circularity of the narrative of return as problematic. It offers the safety of the nursery, but that safety may be illusory or entrapping, and children's literature may in fact be used to secure the child in a state of stasis even in its apparent offer of adventurous freedom or mobility. The cyclical children's tale may thus paradoxically work to hold the child reader in place even as narratives of departure and return appear to promise movement and growth.

David Rudd extends and challenges Rose's analysis, observing that the notion that children's literature should not disturb the "psychic barriers" between the cultural categories of adult and child relies on a suspect dichotomy and "a disavowal that is regularly troubled" in children's literature (63). Rudd argues that "It is precisely because of a knowledge of the fragility of their adult selves . . . that writers for children seek to shore up the psychic barriers"; despite this attempt, however, the "faultlines" between these two apparently discrete categor-

ies are always there “to be read by either party,” adult reader or child (63). Since this article addresses the ways in which *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* counter the familiar model of adolescence as a linear, unilateral, unidirectional movement from childhood to adulthood, it must acknowledge Rudd’s point and stipulate that the key terms of child, adult, and adolescent are rarely settled terms, and that the sheer breadth and complexity of the field of literature for young readers ensures that no single narrative trope or topos can unproblematically represent something as complex as maturation. Scholars such as Wendy Stainton-Rogers and Rex Stainton-Rogers, for example, insist that these categories are themselves socially constructed. What they call “word children,” or iconic fictional representations of children, are the same images of the child collectively produced and institutionalized by the study, theorization, and accumulation over time of a discursive body of scholarly narratives concerning childhood and adolescence in education and the social sciences. Indeed, the Stainton-Rogerses do not distinguish between these types of representations, the fictional and the scholarly: they note that both are “cast within the domain of texts and images,” and thus are “of exactly the same order. . . . What we call the study of children is, on this reading, always the study of re-presentations of children” (193).

When the narrative patterns observed in literature closely imitate, as the Stainton-Rogerses suggest, the most dominant narratives produced by “the study of children,” they call for a careful examination of the ways in which they reinforce the familiar narratives of childhood that circulate through culture in many forms. This is also the case with narratives of adolescence, in which adolescence is repeatedly defined in relation to the lines dividing it both from childhood and from adulthood. Unlike textual representations of childhood as an embryonic yet static state, one of “suspension, of permanent becoming” (Savage 80), adolescence is typically depicted as something to leave behind as quickly as possible. As Rose’s work suggests, children’s literature often bears the burden of adult fears that frame the growth out of childhood as a tragic or traumatic experience, something to defer for as long as possible: within this framing, an extended stay in never-never land is necessary to protect childhood’s perceived and essentialized innocence. In marked contrast, both theorizations and representations of adolescence typically treat it as a transitory state, a threshold most significant in its crossing.

This conception, which relies on a firmly drawn line between adolescent and adult, so dominates both scholarly constructions and popular representations of adolescence that it has influenced most “practical and analytical approaches to education and the social sciences” (Waller 29). Reflecting this, the dominant narrative pattern in YA books, or novels marketed to young adult readers, is most often straightforwardly linear; it offers a plot not of temporary departure followed by return but of permanent departure, completed transition, and the irreversible forward momentum of development. In such narratives, teenage characters progress through the developmental stage of young adulthood, overcoming questions of identity and negotiating the conflicts that impede their transition into adulthood. Catherine Sheldrick Ross suggests that the typical pattern of YA novels “is the rite of passage from childhood to maturity. At the heart of the genre is the change of status that comes with the initiation into new knowledge” (177). Overcoming the various conflicts unique to young adulthood creates new knowledge that allows a teenage protagonist to move forward into adulthood. This fictional narrative finds its corollary in the narratives of developmental theory which, with the rise of the new disciplines of psychology and sociology, became the dominant North American model for understanding youth, instilling “developmentalism” as “the governing framework for adolescence,” with adulthood correspondingly framed as the completion of adolescence’s “preparatory” purpose (Waller 30).

This understanding of adolescent development is most clearly embodied in the YA novel, a publishing category that has become synonymous in North America with the “problem novel.” As Ross notes, the problem novel was early identified as a subgenre that was realistic, socially attentive, and “strongly subject-oriented”; it characteristically featured “adult-oriented” topics such as “divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death” (175). By the mid-1970s, the problem novel had come to dominate publishing for young adult readers, and by the mid-1980s, critics like Ross were asserting that the genre’s rise demanded critical attention: such books “have been available for long enough, in such quantities, and with such a large YA readership [as] to warrant an analysis of the genre” (175). More recently, a “critical vexation” with the problem novel has developed: Joseph Sommers observes that “critics have looked at the problem novel in light of its more well-known young adult predecessor, the *Bildungsroman*, and found [it] lack-

ing, even adversarial, in comparison” (264). Critics have tended to denigrate what David Russell calls the problem novel’s “predictable plots, shallow characters and trite dialogue” (qtd. in Sommers 264). Perhaps this vexation arises because, as Benjamin Lefebvre observes, there is something noteworthy about the problem novel that goes beyond its predictability and frequent lack of depth. Lefebvre explores what such fiction tends to elide and eliminate, especially in relation to homosexuality, for its YA readers. Part of the difficulty, he notes, lies in the “conventions” of the genre, including the premise that “straightforward, explicit lessons for its readers” must be part of the fictional resolution; problem novels are thus “designed so that the values and attitudes within them — those assumed as much as those stated explicitly — will be offered to real adolescents on their journey toward adulthood” (Lefebvre 292). Definitions of the problem novel are also at issue, in that they are often so broad as to make the term amorphous; as Laurence Steven points out, if the development of autonomous thought and action were at the centre of the YA plot, then the novels of L.M. Montgomery would be categorized with those of Judy Blume, Brian Doyle, or Beth Goobie (153). Steven VanderStaay, therefore, usefully expands the defining “rite” at the heart of YA fiction as going beyond developing autonomy of thought and action to include the protagonist having to develop this autonomy in response to a problem created and “thrust upon” the protagonist by “the adult world” (49).

This is unmistakably the case in *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming*, in which the catastrophes of the plot are set in motion not by mistakes or failings on the part of the adolescent protagonists but by corrupt politicians, selfish parents, and self-interested or self-deceiving townsfolk. Theo is raised, in *Awake and Dreaming*, by Rae, a young mother who gave birth to her at the age of sixteen and takes little or no responsibility for her: she leaves Theo alone for days at a time, spends their grocery money on cheap jewelry, and sends Theo away in order to pacify her most recent boyfriend. Her parental failure is reflected in the fact that Theo calls Rae by her first name; Rae is so different than the idealized mothers in the children’s books Theo avidly reads that Theo seems, at times, not to recognize her as a mother. In addition, from an early age, Theo is much more effective at navigating adult structures of survival and bureaucracy than Rae is: she knows how to lie plausibly to social workers in order to disguise how

neglected she is at home; she deftly manages well-meaning but ineffective school counsellors; she learns how to “linger by the outside door and come up to the classroom first” to discourage unwanted attention from schoolmates (Pearson 13). Moreover, Theo is much more attuned to social nuance and class tensions than Rae seems to be; she is astute in observing social hierarchy in her classroom, and can pick out the “well-off kids” and the “poor kids” even when they are all “wearing sloppy clothes . . . and everyone looked the same” (14). The fragmentation and collapse to which Rae brings the family is ultimately repaired by Theo, who ends up emerging from her dream of the perfect family in order to educate her real, imperfect family. By the novel’s end, Theo has successfully negotiated for and pragmatically ensured the care Rae was initially unable to offer. Similarly, in *After Hamelin*, the failures of adults create the crisis. As Penelope overhears, greedy, self-interested municipal politicians conspire to cheat the mysterious Piper of his fee for ridding the town of its plague of rats; they then show no ability or initiative in trying to rectify the problem they have created when the Piper traps the town’s children in the magical realm of Deep Dreaming. In *Dust*, the adults of Horshoe are so concerned with daily survival and so skeptical of the imagination that they have no psychological or intellectual framework through which to recognize Harsich, who claims to be a rainmaker able to end the drought and bring wealth to the town, for the predatory, child-stealing charlatan that he is. The community’s adult authority figures, from politicians to teachers to parents, give in to Harsich’s false promises and collaborate in the construction of his infernal machine, forgetting their vanished children as he narcotizes them with the soporific fantasies that their impoverished imaginations are ill-equipped either to recognize or resist.

Despite this correlation in *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* with what VanderStaaay sees as the problem novel’s defining feature of a crisis precipitated for the adolescent by flawed adults, however, the term *problem novel* cannot be readily applied to these novels. This is true even if we only consider their realistic frame worlds, in which conflict is built around recognizable social issues such as loss of income, parental inability to keep employment, a depressed economy, or individual and collective alienation. In these novels, the failure of adult institutions generates supernatural as well as natural consequences, merging the generic conventions of the realistic problem novel with

those of the supernatural or gothic tale, in which it is not uncommon to find, in more macabre form, the same kinds of social stressors associated with the problem novel, but often without its conventional didacticism and neat resolution. “In these darker worlds,” as Laurie N. Taylor notes, “children are often left alone and ignored, school is a terrifying place, parents are often negligent or abusive” (197). In addition, while Slade, Richardson, and Pearson include in their novels both the central social and identity issues associated with the YA genre and the key “gritty” issues of abuse, neglect, unemployment, hunger, and poverty, they nevertheless subordinate these issues to broader ontological questions and to the more universal issues of loss, mortality, and evil that reach far beyond the typically individual concerns of the problem novel. Pearson’s *Awake and Dreaming*, in fact, subtly references the hyper-individualized quality of the problem novel genre. When Theo searches the school library for new books, she examines “some paperbacks on a revolving stand. But they were mostly novels about one girl or one boy with a problem, or horror stories with scary covers. That wasn’t what she wanted” (18). Instead, Theo reads books about large, idyllic families, the kind she somehow creates and wills herself into when she magically inserts herself into the life of the idealized Kaldor family. Similarly, in *Dust* and *After Hamelin*, individual problems of isolation, alienation and need are pointedly present, as in the conventional problem novel, but they are inevitably framed as broader and more expansive: they are problems of family and community as well as of individual agency and growth, and Theo, Robert, and Penelope act not just as individual agents of their own developing autonomy but, more significantly, as rescuers of the very community that has failed them.

Further, even as they invoke adolescent problem novel issues, *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* resist the model of the linear journey upon which the conventions of the problem novel rest. The “journey toward adulthood,” in Lefebvre’s phrase, is typically so paradigmatically linear and unidirectional in the YA problem novel that its assumptions about progression and development remain on the level of the implicit (292). In contrast, *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming* invoke the paradigm in order to counter it, replacing the singular road to adulthood favoured by the problem novel with a twisting border-path that meanders in, out of, and between childhood and adulthood, often partaking of both. In *Dust*, Robert’s surname, Steelgate,

reinforces this recasting of liminality. Gates are simultaneously exits and entrances: they can protect or imprison, welcome or exclude, swing wide or clamp shut. Conceptually evoking both barrier and entry point, gates are at once solid and permeable, fixed and moving, and Robert's name seems thus to call up the contradictions, elisions, and ambiguities of the "one road to adulthood" paradigm underpinning adolescent problem fiction. This is echoed in *After Hamelin* and *Awake and Dreaming*. Penelope, for example, solves some of her problems with conventionally adult logic and some with conventionally childish illogic such as deliberately silly wordplay or skipping games; she uses both efficiently, creatively, and effectively to defeat the powerful Piper and rescue the children of her town, drawing both on the rational talents valued in her mundane world and on the inspired irrationality integral to the world of dreaming that she is uniquely able to navigate. Just as the line between childhood and adulthood is depicted as fluid and permeable, then, so is the line dividing the supposedly disparate realms of fantasy and reality. Similarly, in *Awake and Dreaming*, after Theo's dream world disintegrates, she initially has what one might think of as an adult reaction that seems to support the linear development model, resolutely renouncing both daydreaming and fiction as things that are "dangerous" and that "made her yearn for things she couldn't have" (150). However, she eventually realizes that what she has learned in the dream world can also help her thrive in the real, and even as she learns to negotiate rationally, showing greater logic and resourcefulness than most of the adults surrounding her, she also ultimately re-embraces the power of her fantastic dreaming. With the help of Cecily, the ghost, Theo realizes that "You can't live in a fantasy — you have to live the life you have" (229). Theo accepts this truth, but she also learns to reinvigorate, enrich, and materially improve the life she has, rather than simply resigning herself to it. However, because of her haunting by Cecily, Theo also recommits herself to the fantasy world that the adults in her family denigrate, refusing their deadening television "stories . . . on the screen" (150) in favour of rereading the children's books she briefly abjured. Recommitting herself to the transliminal consciousness, Theo manages to create and preserve a space of interstitiality, informed at once by the strengths of maturity and the freedoms of childishness.

The generic hybridity common to each of these novels consolidates their revaluation of permeable boundaries and interstitiality. Each text



marries elements of the realist problem novel to elements of the fantastic tale: tropes drawn from the gothic, traditional *Märchen*, the uncanny, and the psychological tale of terror abound. Each text offers points of intrusion or exchange between the two apparently distinct realms of the familiar/rational/real and the unknown/a-rational/fantastic. This appears textually in the novels' references to generic codes and conventions, often invoked and dismissed in the same sentence. Although Theo dismisses the library books on the "rotating rack" as either problem novels "or" horror novels, for example, the text itself instructs us that these two categories might not be as distinct as Theo's reading (and publishers' marketing) suggest. The novel's opening scene, for example, is set in a graveyard in which the first character to appear, "the ghost," watches "Crows [circle] the empty cemetery" and thinks "It's a *spooky* night. . . . A good setting for a ghost story" (2). The perfect gothic opening is countered, however, by the fact that this ghost story unfolds in daylight and domesticity; the cemetery is not the site of the story's drama, which occurs instead in brightly-lit settings: in crowds, at midday, under a blue sky. In *Awake and Dreaming*, then, the familiar story of "one girl . . . with a problem" meets and merges with "horror stories" (18), blurring the generic line that conventionally separates the two narrative traditions. Similarly, in *Dust*, the setting of Saskatchewan in the Dust Bowl years suggests classic prairie realism, as evident in the opening scene: "He understood the connection between himself and the land, understood that he belonged there. . . . When the sun darkened his skin, he knew the invisible rays were also working on the field of wheat beside him" (1). Soon, however, gothic omens like bloody eggs, grim dreams, and sinister premonitions intrude upon this naturalistic scene. Even the odd spelling of the town's name of Horshoe, which at first glance evokes something solid, practical, and eminently familiar, suggests that this is a landscape that might require a second glance, if not a double take. With villains ranging from the mundane (an oppressive schoolteacher) to the fantastic (a deathless former Pharaoh who harvests the souls of stolen children and can hypnotize whole towns into collective amnesia), and with voracious space aliens thrown in at the end for good measure, *Dust's* mixing of generic tropes is nothing less than ebullient. *After Hamelin*, too, commingles elements of memoir, fairy tale, horror story, female *Bildungsroman*, and classical myth. In each text, this exuberant hybridity echoes the protagonists' hybridity of consciousness, the interstitial imagination that

allows them to slide between types of reality as the texts slide between categories of fiction. Most strikingly, this consciousness is explored in all three novels through the centrality of dreaming.

In *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming*, dreams function as an essential topos, a way to break down the conventional linearity of the adolescent developmental narrative of progression and replace it with a discourse of liminality. In these texts, dreams are used to suggest the permeability of the line between things: between waking and sleeping, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the real and the unreal. In this, they significantly depart from one of the strongest conventions of dream use in modern fantasy, in which dreams work to reinforce and solidify the distinction between real and unreal. In this model, “the dream sequence is conventionally seen as a distancing from the fantastic, a means of denying belief” (Mendlesohn 18). In Pearson’s, Richardson’s, and Slade’s novels, however, dreams have another role entirely: they breach, soften, distort, or dissolve the line between different states of being and states of consciousness. The title of *Awake and Dreaming* most overtly suggests this, with the conjunction *and* replacing the more predictable *or*, as if to alert readers that they are entering a realm of both/and rather than either/or, a place in which one can exist, as Theo does, simultaneously in two states that the rational world assumes to be mutually exclusive. The title prefigures the complexity of the ontological fantasy structuring the text: the concrete, everyday world of the problem novel provides a narrative frame built around the crisis of survival that Theo must solve since her inadequate family cannot. This real dilemma “bookends” the story, a narrative structure symbolically appropriate for the fiction-loving Theo, who sees her world in stark contrast to the innocence, safety, and harmony shown in her favourite nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children’s books. At the beginning and end of *Awake and Dreaming*, Theo faces in the everyday world the kinds of survival and identity issues fundamental to the YA problem novel plot. The main action of the novel, however, occurs at the edges of this plot, in the same way that the ghost writer herself, in an instance of Pearson’s subtle wordplay, hovers “on the edge of her plot” as she haunts her own grave at the local cemetery (230). This “edge” action is fundamentally liminal: it locates itself around the psychic thresholds of reality and is centred in the extended, persuasive, and deceptive dream sequence that Theo enters without realizing it, driven by the

sheer imaginative force of her desire for a better family and a better life. Such fantasy spaces are sandwiched between the harsh realities of Theo's quotidian experience; they are addictive but cannot be sustained. The dream plot fails as, simultaneously, the perfection of Theo's idealized fantasy family begins to break down and the ghost of Cecily Stone relinquishes at last her hopes for her final, unwritten novel; Cecily tells Theo, "You faded away just as my idea faded away — when I couldn't solve the main problem of the story" (210). Theo's magical dream life, the joint product of her intense desire for belonging and Cecily's desire to write one last perfect book, is not ultimately viable. However, when Theo realizes her dream is not an escape from problem-riddled reality, she carries into that reality some of the ghost's fundamental axioms, including the notion, challenging the chief currency of the realm of rationalism, that "an idea is like a dream" (210). This wisdom gives Theo the energy to begin to change her reality: like the ferry on which Theo first, with Cecily's help, dreams the Kaldors into being and which moves between two spaces, symbolically partaking of both solid and liquid states, Theo must navigate two states of consciousness, carrying her enriched experience across their bounds.

In *Dust*, likewise, both dreams and fiction work to break down the barriers that ostensibly divide contradictory states of being and consciousness. Harsich's pronouncement that Robert Steelgate is "between boy and man" and therefore that he resides on the cusp "between the waking and the dreaming" (118) reflects the common attitude of the pragmatic but limited adults who inhabit all three novels. It also reflects broader cultural assumptions about childhood. Although, as Thomas Travisano cautions, "Current measurements of the differences between adult consciousness and the consciousness of the child remain crude and partial" (24), these novels critically invoke what is nevertheless a familiar cultural narrative aligning childhood with dreams and adulthood with waking and "real life." Each text challenges that equation: for example, the adult supernatural agents deliberately employ the possibilities of the dream realm to evade the boundaries of mortality that, in the natural, logical world, would end his or her existence. *Dust's* Harsich, for example, sustains his extended life by feeding off the vivid dream-energy of the children of the town, siphoning off, collecting, and selling the life force of their dreams and leaving the children depleted husks. All three supernatural agents, in fact, are revenants who linger and act in

the real through the fantastic mechanisms of dreaming, just as all three adolescent protagonists learn to use the strengths imported from the dream world rationally, even strategically, to thrive in the realm of the real. Rather than abandoning their vital dreams and unbounded imaginations as they move out of childhood and into adulthood, however, as the developmental paradigm suggests is inevitable, these adolescents thrive by combining the strengths and strategies associated with both.

*After Hamelin* similarly subverts assumptions about the conventional impermeability of the boundaries between waking consciousness and dream consciousness. At first glance, the novel appears to establish clear divisions between the waking world and the world of Deep Dreaming: Deep Dreaming represents a kind of elsewhere or “otherwhere,” a realm that can be entered only by the rare few who possess the mystical gift. However, the ease with which Penelope passes into, through, and across the borders between her familiar life and the fantastic realm of Deep Dreaming suggests that the borders between the two are by no means rigid. The fact that the Pied Piper and Penelope can not only cross fluidly themselves but also can transport others, even crowds, with them suggests that perhaps this boundary is less imposing than the adult initiates of Deep Dreaming suggest. (Penelope’s name, like the Pied Piper’s, invokes another well-worn tale and another well-known traveller; this Penelope, however, unlike Odysseus’s, can do her own travelling rather than wait on her husband’s, even if Richardson’s Penelope is bodily, like the classical Penelope, stuck at home while she dreams. With the early Penelope’s classical weaving thread transformed in *After Hamelin* into a modern, spell-weaving jump rope, our Penelope can, literally and figuratively, skip town.) Moreover, Deep Dreaming, the state that is supposedly so rare that few can access it, is in some respects oddly like Richardson’s version of the town of Hamelin itself. In a brief prefatory note, Richardson says that “although the Pied Piper legend comes from the Middle Ages, and Hamelin is a real town, . . . this story is not tied to those particulars. It unfolds in a place that isn’t here and a time that isn’t now” (n. pag.). Richardson’s novel, then, is perhaps itself framed as a Deep Dream. The relation of the Deep Dream to the “not-here, not-now” that is the novel’s Hamelin creates vertiginous ontological recursions, further weakening the borders between real and unreal. The thematic centrality of the threshold in the novel is kept in play by the structural passing on of Penelope’s tale, which crosses borders of

generations and narration, just as it crosses borders of consciousness. The story is handed down and handed off from the original Penelope to another, unrelated Penelope, whose father meets the aged protagonist-Penelope on the eve of her death at age 101 as the new, young Penelope is on the eve of her eleventh birthday: the very moment that the protagonist-Penelope's own story begins. Finally, the torch of the tale is passed directly to the reader, who must in turn, as Penelope the narrator says, take up the task of facing down the Piper. While Penelope's story seems at first remarkable and singular, therefore, by the novel's end it multiplies, carrying on into new generations. Formally, the shifts between the stories of aged Penelope, the young Penelope who is the hero of old Penelope's tale, and the new Penelope require that readers skip nimbly between narrative voices and characters, just as Penelope must dart between states of consciousness. The complexities of the narrative structure seem to support Richardson's interrogation of the clarity of borders and binaries: while the digits that comprise the narrator's two key ages of eleven and 101 might suggest to a twenty-first-century reader an allusion to the logical world of computer binaries, in which all information may be reduced to a numerical clarity captured in codes of ones and zeroes, the novel soon begins a pattern of proliferation that is much less orderly. In this context, *After Hamelin's* authorial dedication "to anyone who has ever been left behind" implies a subtle critique of the kind of categorical thinking that relies on simplified definitions and narrow labels.

This celebration of the shifting and uncertain is prefigured in the novel's epigraph and echoed in its closing pages. The epigraph, taken from Spanish poet Antonio Machado's *Songs and Proverbs*, offers an elusive reference to an undefined third term of consciousness that exists only liminally: "Between living and dreaming, there is a third thing. Guess it" (n. pag). The epigraph's admonition to "guess" leaves readers in the realm of the unsolved riddle, just as *After Hamelin's* final pages do: will Penelope choose to "marry . . . the Shadow" and end her own life as she concludes her tale (225)? Will she use her magical incantations to punish Mellon, her young tormentor, by turning him into the rat he resembles? Will the new Penelope face the Piper as he emerges anew from the Deep Dream, since "for some things, there can be no ending" (226)? Not only does Penelope the narrator refuse to settle these questions, but the new Penelope, inheritor of the original narrator Penelope's

journal and harp, also refuses this closure. In a gesture that echoes the text's valuing of ambiguity, the new Penelope, at the ending of her long life, simultaneously offers the reader ownership of the story and withholds the answers to Penelope's unanswered questions: "Whoever reads this, wherever you are, take these words. They are yours," promises the new Penelope (227). But of the first Penelope's unanswered questions, she declares, "I could tell. But of course I won't. Everyone deserves to have at least one secret that outlives her" (227).

In *Dust*, the nebulous, ambiguous, and unanswered is also celebrated. Parsing *Dust's* several versions of dreaming illuminates the novel's twist on the trope of liminality. Robert Steelgate's real world, the Depression-era town of Horshoe, Saskatchewan, is grim, and made grimmer by the adults who try to corral his exuberant imagination. Robert is only permitted to read the Bible and must surreptitiously devour the extravagant science fiction and fantasy books his scapegrace uncle Alden secretly provides. For Robert, the Bible is part of the rigid adult world of logic, repression, and restraint: "They were always adding and subtracting in the Bible. . . . God must enjoy counting" (10). Robert, in contrast, enjoys letting stories, language, and landscape "shift his mind into that special dreaming place" (11). This dream space is inaccessible to adults, a place in which the mundane is transformed, with railway tracks becoming in imagination "the spine of a dead dinosaur or a giant sea snake, like that wrapped around the world in the Viking legends" (34), and school maps or the exotic-sounding syllables of new words transporting him into other dimensions. Although the adults think their hard-headed rationality is the only way to survive, in fact it weakens them: they can neither recognize nor subdue the threat of Harsich's sinister intrusion into the real. Even the science fiction writer Alden ultimately fails in *Dust* because he has entered too irrevocably into adulthood: "Robert understood now that he would find no ally in his uncle. . . . [He] could write stories and read books, but he was past the cusp. Too old to believe in magic and soul dust. An adult" (129). With their atrophied awareness, the townspeople are easy prey for Harsich. Like Theo's mother, aunt, and neighbour in *Awake and Dreaming*, who consider reading fiction escapist but lose themselves nightly in narcotic television, Robert's parents and the townspeople of Horshoe are figuratively put to sleep by a picture show, the "Mirror of All Things" spectacle that Harsich stages in the town's Royal Theatre.

Just as Penelope uses mirrors as a medium of transport between waking and dreaming, so Harish harnesses the gothic mirror to transport the townspeople; in contrast to the truths of Penelope's Deep Dreaming, however, Harsich offers a false dream, a hypnagogic "smoke and mirrors" fantasy (68). From that point on, the adults of *Horshoe* are "sleep-walking" (50). While they are lost in dreams that make them forget the town's disappearing children, this woolgathering is clearly presented as ontologically different from Robert's high-order fantasizing. Unlike the adults, Robert recognizes and rejects the false dreaming Harsich cultivates: "He shook his head. There was something wrong with his mind, the way he kept daydreaming. . . . Every moment was filled with daydreams. Too many of them" (75). Instead, the true dreaming generated by Robert's fantastical imagination and alert, transliminal consciousness saves him. This is symbolized in a crucial scene in which Harsich sends him a happy but deceptive dream of his vanished younger brother in order to lure Robert to him. As Robert climbs out of bed to follow Harsich's dream to his death, one of his hidden, forbidden science fiction books falls from beneath his pillow, and the sound of its falling wakes him from the false dream with the reminder of the possibility of the true dream, thus waking and saving him.

As each protagonist learns, the adult world can create problems beyond the solution of childhood. Adolescence, however, with its ability to seize and shape the strengths of both states, is depicted in these novels as paradoxically potent: it can imaginatively circumnavigate the thresholds between apparent opposites. As psychologists and sociologists working in the developmental tradition note, adolescents themselves are often profoundly ambivalent about adolescence, reaching eagerly toward the new freedoms of adulthood even as they nostalgically recall the lost freedoms of childhood (Coleman and Hendry 11). Within the developmental framework that figures adolescence as a threshold that must be irrevocably crossed, "adulthood ostensibly signifies the time [in which] childish tales ought to be put away" (Smith 131). This sense of irrevocability perhaps reflects a broader adult anxiety that, again, may be traced back to Romanticism's construction of childhood as something defined not only in terms of idealized qualities like spontaneity, innocence, and imagination, but also in terms of irrecoverability; as Linda M. Austin notes, this belief was encapsulated in Wordsworth's famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807), which "treats the

loss, awe, and estrangement framing the adult's sense of childhood as features of a common psychological profile" (6). The "Ode," notes Austin, evoked nostalgia among its contemporary adult readers, inviting "a shared sense . . . of inevitable forgetting, of the remoteness of the condition of childhood. In addition, it conveys the extraordinariness of the ordinary childhood, one contained in the adult's perceptual and memorative field and best summarized as a lost sense of potential" (6). In *Dust*, *After Hamelin*, and *Awake and Dreaming*, however, this enduring and culturally resilient motif of loss is challenged; instead, the interstitial space of adolescence is represented not as abandoning but as preserving the dreams of childhood to inform an expanded vision of maturity, offering a way to explore larger and increasingly consequential cultural discourses about the nature of adolescence and of adulthood.

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