

RECORDING THE SUBALTERN'S SPEECH

*Children's Voices in the Antwerp School Archives,
ca 1850-1900*

- Josephine Hoegaerts -

On the nineteenth of July 1875, Headmaster Rotsaert addressed a long letter to the director of the municipal schools of Antwerp. The subject was Jan Negers, a twelve-year-old boy who had been transferred to Rotsaert's school at the age of ten, and since then had apparently caused nothing but trouble. Rotsaert's letter contained a list of complaints by different teachers, all lamenting the boy's appalling behaviour : his rebellion, his lack of a sense of duty, and his hostility and aggression. No efforts to ameliorate his attitude seem to have worked (the letter even mentions the intervention of a policeman), and no punishment was effective. On the contrary, "when he is punished, he screams in anger", according to a Mr. De Pooter, who considered young Jan to be "a liar of the worst kind".

The picture emerging from Headmaster Rotsaert's letter is one of a very recalcitrant child indeed: Jan Negers did not adhere to school rules, did not heed his teachers' warnings and, above all, refused to be silenced in the disciplinary context of the school¹. He was constantly crying, screaming or yelling abuse. For all his volubility, however, only two complete sentences emerged: a threatening "just you wait, I'll find you" and a snarled "don't touch me", both directed at a teacher². Despite the boy's alleged audibility in class and on the playground, Rotsaert's letter effectively silences Jan Negers for posterity. For the reader of the time, as well as for historians, only two moments of actual speech are recorded in the letter. Apart from these, Jan's sounds are categorised as meaningless noise³.

Whilst the observation that naughty children were a source of worry in the nineteenth century is hardly surprising, the exchange of letters over their behaviour does alert us to several issues in the history of childhood that might otherwise be forgotten. Firstly, it shows just how little we know of the actual 'practices' of childhood in the past: Jan is one of very few

schoolboys whose voice is heard in school archives. Children's usual (good) behaviour was rarely documented; neither were their polite responses to teachers' questions. Secondly, the correspondence draws our attention to children's agency within the disciplinary contexts in which they grew up. Karen Sanchez-Eppler has noted in her study of children's part in nineteenth-century American culture, that children are often approached by historians as "objects of socialization" – as if they were the simple receptors of the norms held up to them by teachers, parents, priests and books⁴. The problematic education of children like Jan Negers suggests that it was not quite so simple: not only did not all children play by the rules, they actively interpreted the rules in the first place⁵. It also shows us that our image of childhood is to a large degree dictated by the adults who controlled the representation of institutions in which children were present. Despite the increasing sense, in the nineteenth century, that children required special 'care' and should occupy a particular, affectively defined, place within society (what Ariès has termed the 'sentimentalization of childhood'), and despite their designation as the 'future of

1. Letter Rotsaert, 19 July 1875 in *Varia. Briefwisseling van en aan onderwijzers, over leerboeken, klachten van ouders, verslagen van de commissie van onderwijs, enz. 1866-1877* (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/2). "Negers heeft een slecht gedrag, maakt geen of slecht werk, gaat niets vooruit. Als hij gestraft wordt, schreit hij van woede, het is een huichelaar van de ergste soort". 2. "Wacht maar eens, ik zal u wel vinden" and "blijf van mijn lijf". 3. They are effectively designated as 'sound out of place'. JACQUES ATTALI, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Minneapolis, MN, 1985, p. 27. 4. KAREN SANCHEZ-EPPLE, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, Chicago, IL, 2005, p. xv. 5. In a sense, then, the unconventional behaviour of the children described below can be read as forms of 'agency' in the meaning conferred on that term by social historians like E.P. Thompson, and I frame it within an attempt to rescue young children "from the enormous condescension of posterity". Or, in other words, these children's inability to effect change individually does not imply a lack of agency: children did indeed contribute consciously to "the making of history". E.P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1991, (orig.1963), p. 12.

the nation', children were effectively denied the right to speak for themselves⁶. Not only in a political sense (although children were not, and emphatically are not, citizens)⁷, but also in a wider cultural context: education forced them to reproduce 'hegemonic' discourses while any 'other' sounds they produced would be dismissed as either emotional outbursts or simply noise (i.e. not rational speech).

In light of these considerations children can indeed be approached as subalterns. In their 1994 volume on *Infant Tongues : Children's Voices in Literature*, Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark Heberle and Naomi Sokoloff note that, in the many post-modern attempts to make room for those who have been marginalised by their gendered, racial or class identity, children have generally remained invisible.

"To be aware of how your own identity is fashioned by the construction of the Other is initially deconstructive but ultimately liberating, since it strengthens self-awareness without requiring the misrepresentation of other selves. Until very recently, this ongoing critical revolution has given little attention to how literature written for adults represents children, whose interests in general are too often marginalized (...) The border between the child and the adult is necessarily controlled by the latter, but not necessarily in the interest of that other self whom the adult has effaced or transcended"⁸.

Children, they argue, have been "benignly neglected" like some "domesticized Other". Their domestication is double, of course. On the one hand, they seem to belong to the warmth and safety of the home-and-family context (at least from the late eighteenth century onward). On the other hand, children also 'hit close to home' with all of us : in them, we can easily recognise ourselves (or the child we once were) or project the future adults they will be onto our own imaginations of self. Because the state of childhood is necessarily transient, children's marginalised place in society is hard to pin down. Yes, children may lack a public or political voice, but each child is also expected to 'transcend' its current state and become a citizen in its own right. According to bell hooks, "to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body", and that is precisely where (modern) children usually are. Part of society, but also "across the tracks", outside adults' conversations and devoid of the power and autonomy that is so central to the modern notion of an individual⁹. Unlike other marginalised groups, however, children (or some children, at least) can eventually move out of the margins and into the centre. Yet while they are in their fluid, marginal, state, they can contribute to the kind of "counter hegemonic discourse" that is produced in the margins. In order for that transient discourse to be audible, however, these little subalterns need somehow to make themselves

6. This seems to be inherent in modern notions of 'pedagogy'. Paulo Freire has suggested that a 'culture of silence' reigns in conventional schooling. PAULO FREIRE, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, 2005 (orig.1970), p. 43-70. 7. Of course, this would be a temporary state for some of them. 'Age is inherently transitional', as Sanchez-Eppler notes, and so is childhood as a category. SANCHEZ-EPPLER, *Dependent States*, p. xxv. 8. ELIZABETH GOODENOUGH, MARK A. HEBERLE & NAOMI SOKOLOFF, *Infant Tongues : Children's Voices in Literature*, Detroit, 1994, p. 2. 9. Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory : from Margin to Center*, London, 2000, p. xvi.

heard. And, as *Infant Tongues* suggests, that is hardly self-evident. In her review of the book, Judith Plotz argues that children are indeed subalterns whose ability to speak is severely compromised by the “linguistic dislocation” demanded of them, as they have to assume adult modes of speech in order to be considered sufficiently “developed” to be capable of actual speaking.

“The dominant twentieth-century constructs of language development, whether Freudian, Jungian, or Lacanian, suggest an inverse relationship between language mastery and childhood consciousness : the greater the mastery of discourse in the symbolic realm, the less of childhood consciousness in the imaginary”¹⁰.

Children are associated much more often with vocal sounds other than speech : crying (especially when they are very young), yelling, singing and indeed different kinds of ‘noise’.

In this paper I attempt to tease out these ‘other’ sounds, thereby revisiting the canonic question posed by Gayatri C. Spivak,

“Can the subaltern speak ?”¹¹. On first consideration, children would seem to confirm Spivak’s negative answer : children are *in-fans* (speechless, or ‘muted’, as Keith Thomas would have it)¹², especially in the nineteenth century, when innocence became a fundamental characteristic of childhood, linking the child and its “cognitive receptivity with a silent assent to narrative”¹³. Only through socialization or the assimilation of adult discourse could a child acquire speech, at which point the child would cease to be a child. In that sense, children’s speech resembled that of colonial subalterns, who were equally obliged to assimilate. Their acquisition of the ‘language of command’ in a colonial context signalled assimilation into colonial ways of knowing, even though the colonial subaltern could never ‘become’ the colonist, whereas children will eventually become adults¹⁴. Spivak’s answer to the question she posed is a resounding ‘no’, partly because of the impossibility of the colonial subject to leave the subaltern status, but also because Spivak’s definitions of ‘in-fans’ and speech are political and metaphorical rather than acoustic. I will argue, however, that

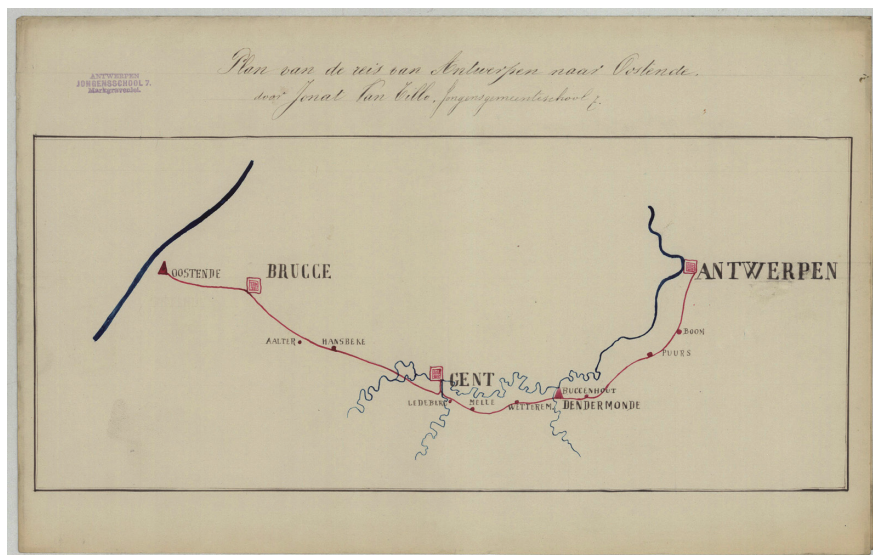
10. JUDITH PLOTZ, “Shut Up, He Explained; Or, Can the Young Subaltern Speak?”, in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, no. 21, 3 (1996), p. 140-142. **11.** GAYATRY C. SPIVAK, “Can the subaltern speak?”, in *Geographies of Postcolonialism*, London, ed. J.P. Sharp, 2009. **12.** The word ‘in-fans’ originally referred to a ‘speechless’ child. As Adriana Cavarero has shown, that does not necessarily imply silence (the infant’s cry can be a particularly powerful means of communication), but it does imply the lack of rational speech and the social possibilities that come with it. Spivak associates the “speechless realm of the gendered subaltern” explicitly with the *in-fans*. ATHENA ATHANASIOU, “Undoing Language: Gender Dissent and the Disquiet of Silence”, in *Language and Sexuality (Through and) Beyond Gender*, Cambridge, eds. Costas Canakis, Venetia Kantsa, Kostas Yiannakopoulos, 2010, p. 219-246, 234; ADRIANA CAVARERO, *For More than One Voice : Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Stanford, CA, 2005, 169; SPIVAK, “Echo”, in *New Literary History*, 24 (1), (1993), p. 17-43, 33; KEITH THOMAS, “Children in Early Modern England”, in *Children and Their Books : A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, Oxford, eds. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs, 1989, p. 45-77. **13.** PLOTZ, “Shut up, He Explained”, p. 141. **14.** BERNARD S. COHN, “The Command of Language and the Language of Command”, in BERNARD COHN, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India*, Princeton, 1996, p. 16-56.

taking Spivak's question more literally might result in a different answer for nineteenth-century children and might illuminate the agency (albeit limited) of nineteenth-century children – and not only of rebellious ones like Jan Negers. My literal approach will lead me down two avenues of research. Firstly, I want to focus on the acoustic and somatic characteristics of speech and try to go beyond notions of noise and shouting as documented in the archives to uncover children's conscious or tactical use of their voices in the educational context. Second, I take up Spivak's archival proposal, in which the practice of silencing the subaltern is carried out in (and by) the archive, and uncovering her voice is a matter of "measuring silences", of recovering subjects "lost in an institutional textuality"¹⁵.

The archival material used here comes from one of the most iconic and normative institutions in which the history of childhood can be studied: the school. The material thus represents exactly the kind of institutional textuality in which subaltern speech can so easily become lost (or be hidden and silenced).

I will be basing my analysis on the archives of the municipal primary schools for boys in Antwerp in the second half of the nineteenth century (the documents are now preserved at the Antwerp City Archives)¹⁶. Within this body of texts, I will focus specifically on the correspondence *about* children that took place between teachers, parents and administrators, and on reports on school excursions *by* the children. Both sets of documents represent a specific practice of silencing, performed not only by the adults involved, but also by the children themselves. (One of the results of these practices is, of course, that despite the rather large body of material available, my analysis – if I want to take children's voices seriously – has to rely on the very few sources in which children's actual words are present.) Both sets also offer possibilities for uncovering something that can arguably be heard as the faint echo of children's voices in the archives. Even if these voices are not immediately recognisable as intelligible or authentic speech, they provide a powerful comment from the margins of educational discourse and conventional nineteenth-century representations of childhood¹⁷.

15. SANDHYA SHETTY & ELIZABETH JANE BELLAMY, "Postcolonialism's Archive Fever", in *Diacritics*, no. 30, 1 (2000), p. 25-48. Shetty and Bellamy also include a short reception history of Spivak's original text, which shows the extent to which 'speaking' and the lost 'voice' have been interpreted as a metaphorical or political voice, rather than an acoustic or audible one. 16. The City Archives contain documents that include correspondence between teachers, parents and city council members, internal notes, reports and press cuttings, on all the municipal schools within the city limits (numerous new schools were built in the course of the century. Around 1900, there were about 40 municipal primary schools in Antwerp). The archives are particularly rich in documents on the excursions organised by the schools. Small outings (to local landmarks and the Antwerp Zoo, for example) were organised from the 1850s onwards. More extensive trips to cities across the country became common in the late 1870s, and children's reports on these trips have been preserved. The research presented here draws on the school archives as a whole, but my attention will be squarely on the material produced by children. (On the Antwerp school buildings and their impact on urban space, see INGE BERTELS, *Building the City: Antwerp, 1819-1890*, PhD dissertation, Antwerp, 2008). 17. 'Marginality', as hooks reminds us, can be 'a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse'. bell hooks, "marginality as site of resistance", in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, MA, eds. R. Ferguson et al., 1992, p. 341-343, 341.



Hand-drawn map of a school excursion to Oostende, 1883. (Source : "Plan van de reis van Antwerpen naar Oostende", Jonas Van Tillo, Jongensgemeenteschool 7, MA # 223/22, 1883. © FelixArchief, Stadsarchief Antwerpen.)

I. Children in Belgian historiography : Pedagogy, protection and punishment

The establishment of the history of childhood as a field of study is generally ascribed to Philippe Ariès, whose *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) dated the invention of childhood around the time of the Industrial Revolution¹⁸. The 'invention' of childhood in Europe is thereby equated with its institutionalization : children became recognisable 'as children' as schooling became more formalised, children's status within (and outside) the family became established in law (partly in response to the growing problem of child labour in emerging industries), and children's bodies became objects of medical scrutiny as various institutions concerned themselves with the hygienic conditions of children's surroundings and the state of their physical health¹⁹. By connecting the invention of childhood with its institutionalization, Ariès also made the history of childhood feasible in the first place : the focus on (modern) institutions provides historians with identifiable archives (those of education, child protection, youth delinquency,

etc.), which permit scholars at least in part to circumvent the problem of the transient nature of childhood. As new children keep arriving at the institutions, 'childhood' as such is constantly accessible in the documentation²⁰. Belgian childhood historiography is mainly based on the history of institutions. A special issue of the journal *Sextant* in 2002, entitled *Enfances*, illustrates the point : contributions mainly deal with 'child protection' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on the placement of orphans, the work of the International Council of Women in child protection and the foundation of philanthropic societies for the protection of mistreated, abandoned and orphaned children (whom the society called *enfants martyrs*)²¹. Daniel Vandergucht, in his introductory article to the issue, connects the "status of the child in modern society" to processes of educationalization and above all socialization²². Much in the vein of Ariès, he describes the invention of infantile categories (most notably *bébé* in the nineteenth century²³), and shows that the institutionalization of childhood concerns very young children as well as those of school age²⁴.

18. PHILIPPE ARIÈS, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, 1960. 19. See e.g. STEPHANIE SANDRA MCBRIDE-SCHREINER, *Medicalizing Childhood : Pediatrics, Public Health, and Children's Hospitals in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*, Arizona SU, doctoral dissertation, 2014. Furthermore, children's behaviour was increasingly pathologized, their minor misdemeanors no longer treated as crimes, but as a sign of a lack of education, maturity or mental health. 20. One could, as suggested by Keith Thomas, make a distinction between the history of 'childhood' (an idea or concept, arguably mainly given shape by adults) and the history of 'children'. In this text, however, I will take a broad sweep at what could be understood as histories that consider children 'as children', regardless of this distinction. 21. See also FRANCE HUART, "La Société protectrice des enfants martyrs de Bruxelles (1892-1912)", in *Mères et nourrissons : de la bienfaisance à la protection médico-sociale (1830-1945)*, Brussels, eds. Godelieve Masuy-Stroobant et Perrine C. Humblet, 2004. 22. DANIEL VANDERGUCHT, "Le statut de l'enfant dans la société moderne", in *Sextant*, no. 19 (2002), p. 7-18, 9-10. 23. *Idem*, p. 12. 24. As indicated by the rise of kindergartens around the same time. MARC DEPAEPE & FRANK SIMON, "Les écoles gardiennes en Belgique. Histoire et historiographie", in *Histoire de l'éducation*, no. 82 (1999), p. 73-99.

In this text I will mainly focus on children between the ages of approximately four and twelve²⁵, for whom primary school seems the most logical – and best documented – site for research, rather than on infants. It is also the field in which children have received the most attention in Belgian historiography, even if this attention often focuses on the norms and expectations imposed: the history of children in school is part of the history of education, which deals with ideas and institutions more than with the daily practices of young historical actors (the practice of pedagogy is, after all, mainly carried out by educators)²⁶. The historians of education Eliane Gubin and Marc Depaepe, although writing from different perspectives, have both presented this history by and large as one of increasing institutionalization, formalization, medicalization – and as a heavily gendered history²⁷. Pupils are by no means absent or ignored in these histories: their focus on institutional organisation or – more recently – on the material culture of education²⁸ uncovers numerous disciplinary practices. The authors show that the ‘ideal’ pupil in the nineteenth-century classroom

was imagined as silent and immobile. Betty Eggermont’s contribution to the *History of Education* (2001) explicitly addresses this silence and the “choreography” of classroom behaviour, noting that order and silence are parts of the “grammar of schooling”²⁹.

It is worth noting that, even if histories of education often touch upon children’s lives and experiences, they are not synonymous with a ‘history of childhood’. The terms *enfance*, *enfants*, *kinderen* or even *leerlingen* appear rather sporadically in the titles of works on primary schools. The special issue of *Sexant on Enfances* is almost unique in Belgian historiography in its insistence on ‘childhood’ itself as a subject of history, but some instances of an intersection between educational history and the history of childhood can be cited. Geert Thyssen and Marc Depaepe’s contribution to *Children’s Voices* stresses the “sacralization” of childhood in modern education rather than the processes of medicalization and institutionalization³⁰. Another rare instance in which childhood as such is taken up as a subject in the history of education is a contribution to a volume

25. The designation of this category as ‘children’ has been subject to change as well, but holds true for most of the modern period. 26. ANGELO VAN GORP ET AL. *Pedagogische historiografie: een socio-culturele lezing van de geschiedenis van opvoeding en onderwijs*, Leuven, 2011.

27. MARC DEPAEPE, HENDRIK LAUWERS & FRANK SIMON, “De feminisering van het leerkrachtenkorps in België in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw”, in *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, no. 82, (2004), p. 969-994; ELIANE GUBIN, “Libéralisme, féminisme et enseignement des filles en Belgique au XIXe et au début du XXe siècle” in ELIANE GUBIN, *Choisir l’histoire des femmes*, Brussel, 2007, p. 127-146; ELIANE GUBIN & VALÉRIE PIETTE, *Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, 1839-1905. La passion d’enseigner*, Brussel, 2004. 28. PAUL SMEYER & MARC DEPAEPE (eds.), *Educational Research: Material Culture and its Representation*, Heidelberg, 2014. 29. BETTY EGGERMONT, “The Choreography of Schooling as Site of Struggle: Belgian Primary Schools, 1880-1940”, in *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, no. 30, 2, (2001), p. 129-140. 30. GEERT THYSSEN & MARC DEPAEPE, “The sacralization of childhood in a secularized world: Another paradox in the history of education”, in *Children’s Voices: Children’s Perspectives in Ethics, Theology and Religious Education*, Leuven, eds. Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefyt, 2010, p. 187-215.

on *Understanding Children's Rights*³¹. And Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde's recent article on ideological conflicts in a Flemish school in wartime explicitly takes the 'pupil's perspective' as its starting point³². She uses the diary of a secondary school pupil as the starting point for her analysis, and her source "gives children and youth a voice in history and enables us to look at their experiences and agency"³³. She thereby creates room for a history of children within educational history, and shows that the "personal stories" of young historical actors "do not always coincide with textbook histories", once again demonstrating the tension between histories of education and histories of childhood³⁴.

The area of child protection and children's rights represents a second rich avenue of research for the history of childhood in Belgium³⁵. Work on the history of children's rights and child protection are, to a degree, more concerned with children 'as children' (than as pupils in need of education or socialization). However, the definition of childhood employed in these

studies is also derived from its particular institutional (legal) context : the speechless 'in-fant' is the subject that needs to be spoken for and cared for by numerous individuals, groups and legal frameworks³⁶. The above-mentioned philanthropic and charitable societies that have taken charge of orphans, *enfants martyrs* and young children in general have led to histories of the organisation of these societies, and also of the children they attempted to 'protect', albeit to a lesser extent. Pierre Burniat's article on Brussels orphans, for instance, notes how little power young orphans had over their own destiny within this institutionalized environment, and includes the stories of a handful of rebellious girls protesting their lot³⁷. The limited agency of young children under 'protection' of either the state or private societies is reflected in all works on child protection, and the general narrative is one of increasing institutionalization and – especially for very young children – medicalization³⁸. Claudine Marissal's recent history of the protection of infants, for example, underscores the intersection of a hygienist

31. MARC DEPAEPE, "Understanding the History Childhood from the Perspective of Educationalization", in *Understanding Children's Rights : Collected Papers Presented at the Third International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights held at the University of Ghent*, Ghent, ed. Eugène Verhellen, 1998. 32 SARAH VAN RUYSENSVELDE, "Through a pupil's eyes... : A 'chalk face' study on ideological conflict in a Flemish school during World War II", in *History of Education Review*, 43 (2014), p. 62-77. 33. *Idem*, p.63. 34. *Idem*, p.77. 35. MARIE-SYLVIE DUPONT-BOUCHAT & ERIC PIERRE (eds.), *Enfance et Justice au XIX^e siècle. Essais d'histoire comparée de la protection de l'enfance (1820-1914), Belgique, France, Pays-Bas, Canada*, Paris, 2001. 36. And, very often, is not cared for, but these children are much harder to include in the historical record. For a rare example, see VALÉRIE PIETTE & CATY ROLAND, "Les élites et le travail des enfants dans la sphère privée en Belgique au XIX^e siècle", in *Enfants au travail : attitudes des élites en Europe occidentale et méditerranéenne aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Aix en Provence, ed. Caty Roland, 2002, p. 162-186. 37. PIERRE BURNIAT, "Orphelins et orphelines placés chez autrui (Bruxelles, XIX^e siècle)", in *Sextant*, no. 19 (2002), p. 73-102. 38. This mainly concerned their physical well-being, but children's mental health was increasingly under scrutiny as well. See e.g. VEERLE MASSIN, "La 'collocation' ou le transfert de mineures délinquantes en institution psychiatrique : un espace de pouvoirs partagés", in *Justice et espaces publics en Occident, du Moyen Age à nos jours. Pouvoirs, publicité, citoyenneté*, Montréal, eds. Pascal Bastien, Donald Fyson, Jean-Philippe Garneau, Thierry Nootens, 2014, p. 111-122.

movement in Belgium and the emergence of professional childcare and help for young (lower-class) families³⁹.

Generally, the history of childhood in Belgium seems to have been inscribed in the disciplinary frameworks of popular education, with the aim being to 'gentrify' the children of the poor in order to ameliorate and protect the future of the nation. Nowhere is this discourse more prevalent than in the history of youth delinquency⁴⁰. With the invention of childhood, the notion arose of the young criminal with a status distinctly 'other' than that of adult criminal. Jenneke Christiaens' doctoral dissertation dates the 'birth' of young delinquents around the second half of the nineteenth century, noting that for recalcitrant children as well, education be-

came the preferred method of discipline rather than punishment (as had been common practice before children acquired a distinct status)⁴¹. Especially for girls, the use of legal means to impose moral and social norms of behaviour has been researched extensively⁴², demonstrating once again that the archives which give us insight into facets of the history of childhood are mainly sedimentations of (sometimes futile) attempts to uphold adults' idealised and normative perspectives on children's place in society. The histories of 'difficult', 'naughty' and indeed 'criminal' children tend to focus on practices upholding and protecting those norms⁴³, but also suggest that the lived reality of childhood could be far removed from the 'sacred' space of childhood projected by nineteenth-century art and literature⁴⁴.

39. CLAUDINE MARISSAL, *Protéger le jeune enfant : enjeux sociaux, politiques et sexuels (Belgique : 1890-1940)*, Bruxelles, 2014. 40. See e.g. MARIE-SYLVIE DUPONT-BOUCHAT, "L'intérêt de l'enfant. Approche historique", in *Droit et intérêt*, Bruxelles, eds. Philippe Gérard et al., 1990, p. 23-54; MARIE-SYLVIE DUPONT-BOUCHAT, JENNEKE CHRISTIAENS & CHARLOTTE VANNESTE, "Jeunesse et justice (1830-2002)", in *Politieke en sociale geschiedenis in België*, Brugge, eds. Dirk Heirbaut, Xavier Rousseaux and Karel Velle, 2004, p. 125-162. 41. JENNEKE CHRISTIAENS, *De geboorte van de jeugd-delinquent (België, 1830-1930)*, VUB Press, 1999. 42. MARGO DE KOSTER & VEERLE MASSIN, "Delinquente meisjes in de molen van de jeugdbescherming, 1912-1965", in *Panopticon. Tijdschrift voor strafrecht, criminologie en forensisch welzijnswerk*, no.33 (2012), p. 437-453; MARGO DE KOSTER, "Ongepast gedrag van jonge vrouwen en (generatie)conflicten. Ouderlijke klachten over onhandelbare dochters bij de kinderrechter van Antwerpen in 1912-13 en 1924-25", in *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent*, no. 8 (2001), p. 101-131; Id., *Weerbaar, weerspannig of crimineel? Meisjes en jonge vrouwen tussen emancipatie en delinquentie tijdens de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw*, PhD dissertation, VUB, 2003; VEERLE MASSIN, "La déjudiciarisation des mineurs délinquants au profit des institutions psychiatriques : un espace de pouvoirs partagés (Belgique, 1920-1960)", in *Justice et espace public*, Rennes, eds. Pascal Bastien, Donald Fyson and Thierry Nootens, 2012; RENATE BENTEIN, *Brave meisjes en stoute jongens? Genderverschillen in de geschiedenis van de criminaliteit. Onderzoek naar de Hasseltse jeugdrechtbank tijdens het interbellum*, MA thesis, University of Gent, 2004. 43. Older work (e.g. by E. Marlier and P. Wets) speaks of *enfance délinquante* and *enfance coupable*. 44. See e.g. JAN DE MAEYER, "Creating and Disseminating a Catholic Subculture through Children's Literature : The Forgotten Role of the Publishing Houses of Religious Institutes", in *Religious Institutes and Catholic Culture in 19th and 20th-Century Europe*, Leuven, eds. Urs Altermatt, Jan De Maeyer and Franziska Metzger, 2014; JAN DE MAEYER ET AL. (eds.), *Religion, Children's Literature and Modernity in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, Leuven, 2005.



Photograph of an image of children parading for the memory of the Antwerp alderman of education, Everist Allewaert (1835-1889). (Source : "Inhuldiging Allewaert", FOTO-ALBUM # 122, 1890. © FelixArchief, Stadsarchief Antwerpen)

So where does our little Jan Negers fit in the history of childhood as it has been written for Belgium? We find him in the highly normative and institutionalised context of a municipal (i.e. state-controlled) primary school for boys, and the letter about his behaviour betrays some aspects of that institution's educational goals. The teachers emphasise that they have never struck or otherwise abused the child. Their attention to this issue reflects the weight given to physical abuse; even Jan himself might have been aware of this, as he was documented as having yelled, "Don't touch me". Corporal punishment was a sensitive issue, as will become clear in the following paragraphs. Despite visible annoyance, Jan Negers is a 'protected' child, growing up in a world in which the child (as imagined in educational discourse) is indeed sacred and special enough to warrant not only the ire, but also the concern of the adults around him. He is also a rigorously controlled child: not only is his behaviour in the classroom monitored, but he is also under scrutiny on the playground and in the streets, as the involvement of a local policeman will show. This high degree of institutional discipline seems to be linked to a perceived lack of parental supervision. The headmaster's letter suggests that Jan's mother lets the child run wild, while the father is just as aggressive as the son (indicated by the

boy's blackened eye after being disciplined at home)⁴⁵.

The headmaster's letter thus confirms what we know about Belgian childhood in the nineteenth century. Childhood was supposed to take place in a sanctified home environment in which a father's authority above all safeguarded order and behavioural norms. Within the home, as well as at school (where children were spending more and more time), the role of children was to be 'polite', obedient and eager to learn. Failure to play that role, or a lack of access to this ideal home, resulted in a higher degree of institutional discipline, aimed towards the 'protection' of the child and, through it, towards the future of the entire population. However, young Jan's behaviour shows the limited effectiveness of these institutions (and perhaps of paternal authority⁴⁶), along with children's resilience in the face of adult norms and conventions. His behaviour seems to be calculated to impress his young peers rather than his parents or teachers, and against all odds Jan manages to become an individual in the archival records of the school rather than a faceless part of a well-behaved collective. Running out of the school gate with a bloody nose towards home, he demands attention, demands to be 'heard', and challenges us to reconsider the history of

45. Letter Rotsaert, 19 July 1875, in *Varia. Briefwisseling van en aan onderwijzers, over leerboeken, klachten van ouders, verslagen van de commissie van onderwijs, enz. 1866-1877* (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/2). "Verleden jaar omdat hij niettegenstaande mijne vermaningen, niet beterde liet ik den vader verzoeken om mij over zijnen zoon te komen spreken, want ik had vernomen dat de moeder alles voor haren man verborg. Ik verzocht dan den vader, dat hij zijne zoon zoude kastijden. Hij deed het, doch op zulk eene vreedde wijze, dat de jongen gansch misvormd, met dikken neus en blauwe oogen naar de school kwam".

46. JENNEKE CHRISTIAENS, "Stoute kinderen achter slot en grendel. Het vaderlijk tuchtigingsrecht in de ontstaansgeschiedenis van de negentiende-eeuwse kinderbescherming", in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, no. 20 (1994), p. 149-169; CATHERINE JACQUES, "Renforcer l'autorité paternelle au détriment de l'autorité parentale. Un enjeu pour l'État? XVIIIe-XIXe siècles", in *Sextant*, no. 20 (2002), p. 7-38.

education and socialization. Jan Negers is not the “unquestioning child reading in ‘willing and silent compliance’”⁴⁷. To limit our history of childhood to the “vastly educatable”⁴⁸ would be to ignore Jan’s loud comments on the margins.

II. Children on record : Voices in and around the classroom

As I noted at the beginning of this text, it is hard to ascertain what Jan’s comments on the school and his teachers really were : his voice was described as noise rather than as speech by the headmaster. This provides a stark contrast to the teachers, whose words were (possibly literally) transcribed onto paper – and who were thus represented as carriers of rational discourse rather than vessels of unbridled emotion and physicality. The great differences made by teachers between their recordings of children’s voices and those of adults’ is what prompted me to listen for children’s voices in the first place rather than try and uncover the children’s ‘perspectives’⁴⁹. This approach is central to what is ultimately this article’s main purpose: to show that paying attention to the aural and audibility of marginalised groups in history is a valuable project, especially in cases such as these in which source material is scarce. I will be

considering Rotsaert’s letter on Jan Negers and others like it as recordings of an acoustic reality. Recording, according to Jonathan Rée, is “not the same as preservation : it is a technique for generating copies of an original, rather than maintaining it in existence”⁵⁰. This implies, firstly, that written records do not give us direct access to historical reality, but rather they ‘copy’ choice aspects from the writer’s listening experience – influenced by his ability and willingness to hear current tropes in the representation of different voices and by his interaction with the expectations of his audience⁵¹. These recordings are therefore still limited to what contemporary adults were hearing (or indeed ‘willing’ to hear) and do not allow a study of children’s views as such. Yet they do allow us to gauge when and how children managed to become audible in the disciplinary context of a school and to disturb the choreography of schooling.

Equating audibility with forms of rebellion and unconventional behaviour might seem like a dangerous leap to make. Obviously, children’s voices bounced off the school walls all day long, especially at a time when reading aloud and declamation were important aspects of education, music was taught several hours each week and rote learning (characterised by what has been called the ‘schoolboy’s sing-song’) was in vogue⁵².

47. PLOTZ, “Shut up, He Explained”, p. 141. 48. *Ibidem*. 49. The endeavour is therefore related to Van Ruyskensvelde’s goal of writing a history of children in school, but rather than ‘seeing’ ideology through children’s eyes or ‘giving them a voice’, I will be attempting to ‘hear’ children’s discourse by analysing the ways adults documented the sounds they made at school. 50. JONATHAN RÉE, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses – A Philosophical History*, London, 1999, p. 23. 51. As Nicholas Cook observes, “We hear recordings as performances, in other words diegetically, even when we know that the performance represented by the recording never took place”. NICHOLAS COOK, *Beyond the Score : Music as Performance*, New York, 2013, p. 6. 52. On the development of reading aloud, learning ‘by heart’ and declamation, see e.g. KATHERINE ROBSON, *Heart Beats : Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*, Princeton, NJ, 2012.

These happy, obedient and largely collective voices were rarely preserved, however. Many teachers must have heard them as a sort of white noise, and if children's reading or singing voices were mentioned, they are usually used in the archive documents as symbols of the innocence of childhood or of the order of the well-run school. Descriptions of children's voices expressing an eagerness to learn tend to be poetic or sentimental in nature. In a poem by Emmanuel Hiel, an elderly audience is pictured sighing contentedly

How beautiful,
 'tis how one breeds good people.
 A calming, delicious song,
 Springing freshly from children's hearts
 What more could we wish for?⁵³

Orderly singing voices represented the unspoiled nature of the young child, and also the possibility to gentrify the (young) poor. According to a song collection published around the turn of the century, for example, the "pure and silvery voices" of young boys and girls could effectively be mobilised in the battle against alcoholism⁵⁴. Abundant as they are in poetry, song lyrics and school manuals, the 'silvery' infantile voices do not appear in the school correspondence. Documents for internal use dealing with the

sometimes difficult reality of schooling and upholding the disciplinary measures that were readily assumed in normative narratives had no need to record exemplary behaviour. Correspondents were too busy listening out for the raucous voices of disobedience, which, of course, were the ones that stood out anyway.

Most of children's disobedience was probably dealt with in the classroom. When disciplinary measures (determined by regulations, which from the 1860s onwards strictly excluded physical abuse) were successful, there was no reason to write these down, and thus such measures seldom appear in archival documents. Disciplinary actions did not always succeed, however, and many children seem to have decided to show their discontent simply by not showing up at school. Correspondence about pupils initiated by teachers almost always concerned absenteeism – and the issue was often represented as a matter of parental disinterest or (mainly in the case of mothers and especially widows), lack of authority. Children's own reasons for roaming the streets, staying at home or undertaking paid work rather than coming to school were not considered⁵⁵. When correspondence was initiated by parents, however, children's voices were more likely to be included. At issue in these letters was not (only) the child's

53. "t is schoon, o ja! / Zoo kweekt men brave menschen / Een rustig lied, een heerlijk lied / Dat frisch uit kinderherten schiet / Wat kan men beter wenschen?". EMMAUËL HIEL, *Liederen en gezangen voor groote en kleine kinderen*, Brussel, s.d., p. 9. 54. F. VINCKX & J. VINCKX, *Vergeet-mij-nietjes. Liederen voor school en huis in noten en cijferschrift tegen drankmisbruik en dierenmishandeling*, Antwerpen, s.d., p. 6. "Het matigheidslied zal een snedig wapen zijn in de handen onzer leerlingen – onze kindertjes met hunne reine en zilverige stemmekens zullen het aanheffen, onze knapen en meisjes zullen het herhalen en alzoo zal het lied der bestrijding van alkoolisme van lieverlede tot het huis en het later leven doordringen". 55. Although sparse correspondence on the 'telegraph boys' of Antwerp, who sped through the city on foot or on their bicycles to deliver telegrams for a small fee, shows some concern over the latter issue. Letter on "telegramdragers" by Headmaster Haegens, 21 October 1874 (MA 223/2 A).

misbehaviour, but that of the teachers as well. Corporal punishment was the main reason that parents complained to the authorities about their children's treatment in school. In these letters, and especially in the responses by headmasters and the city council, justification for punishment and even its simple existence became a topic of conflict between the child's narrative and the teachers'⁵⁶. When, in 1871, a local Antwerp journal *De Reus* reported that a certain Mr Smeets hit the children and yanked on their ears, the teacher's denial seems to have been taken at face value. In an internal note, probably written by an inspector or headmaster, the author "gave no credence at all to the story of this child, neither whose right nor left ear show any sign of tearing"⁵⁷.

Teachers confronted with an accusation of corporal punishment usually did not include children's voices in their defence : most of them denied having touched the child; some included a brief description of 'bad behaviour' on the part of the pupil and a transcription of their own words. Mr Hollants, writing to his headmaster in 1863 in reference to a

missive sent to all teachers regarding corporal punishment, underscored his unwillingness to beat children and reportedly sent a pupil outside "telling him that I did not want him in the room as long as he was disturbing the class"⁵⁸. In the teachers' correspondence the grammar of schooling was applied to perfection : the teacher observed and spoke, the child moved and acted. (The teacher did not specify exactly how this practice of disturbance was carried out, but did relate his own discourse.) It is perhaps no wonder that parents felt compelled to speak for their children⁵⁹. They did so in part by citing literally their child's description of the situation in school. In the parents' accounts, children's voices appear as the innocent voice of the truth : the children's stories serve as parents' direct (and perhaps only) source of information of what went on behind the school walls. One particularly incensed father, in 1882, cited his little girl on the "lies" she had been taught in public school : "Amongst other things she told me, 'Daddy, there are three holy persons (...). Yes, miss taught us, we are learning the whole catechism !!'"⁶⁰. Much like the collective

56. The school archives contain a handful of exchanges over (contested) physical abuse by teachers. Amongst them is the correspondence between the mayor and a certain Mr. 't Kint, in 1857, between the school inspector and the parents of a boy called Patroons in 1866 and notes on schoolmaster Smeets, whose alleged mistreatment of children in his classroom briefly became the subject of complaints in the local press in 1871. (Antwerp city Archives MA 223/1 and MA 223/17-18). **57.** "*Ik hecht hoegenaamd geen geloof aan het vertelzel van dit kind, aan wiens rechter noch linker oor geene de minste scheur te zien is*". The note is dated 24 March 1871, and was a reaction to an article in *Den Reus. Blad voor Iedereen*, 22 March 1871. (Antwerp city Archives MA 223/1 and MA 223/17-18). **58.** "*Dezen morgen heb ik met Mr Oosterbaen een aardig geval gehad. Gij weet dat de hoofdonderwijzers over eenige dagen aenschrijving gekregen hebben om ons te verwittigen van geene lijfstraf meer gebruik te maken (...). Dezen morgen heb ik dien leerling buiten de klas gezet, hem zeggende dat ik hem niet in de les wilde, zoo lang hij niet ophouden zou de les te stooren*", Letter from Hollants to Mertens, 18 November 1863. (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/1 B). **59.** In none of the cases found in the Antwerp archives did the headmaster or alderman doubt the teachers or question their explanations. **60.** "*Zij zegden mij onder anderen, papa, er zijn 3 goddelijke personen... ik zegde, leugens kindje...Ja, juffer leerd het ons, wij leeren heel de Catechismus!!*". Letter from Jacques Beunis to the alderman of education, 15 October 1882. (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/4 B).

34

46. Oproep.

Gerrit A. A. Wagner.

Krachtig.

Hoe heer-lijk glanst de vrij-heids-zon op
on-zen va-der-grond— waar 't Vlaamsche volk den
Gal ver-won, en recht en vrij-heid vond!— Daar
klonk van Ar-te-vel-des woord,— daar streed Jan
Brei-dels hand,— daar werd zoo vaak de
kreet ge-hoord: ten strijd— voor 't Va-der-land!

2.

Nog zweeft de geest dier mannen rond
En wakt in elke gemoed
De liefde tot den vadergrond
En warmen vrijheidsloed.
Hun tale klinkt nog even schoon,
Zij blijft ons dierbaarst pand!
Wij roepen nog met ferschen toon:
Ten strijd voor 't Vaderland!

3.

Ja, vrijheid, recht en moedertaal,
Zoo dikwijls laf bespot,
Behaalden steeds de zegespraal
Op 't wanselvallig lot.
Dus, broeders, op! met nieuwen moed,
En reikt elkaar de hand!
En offert wijsig goed en bloed
Voor 't dierbaar Vaderland!

F. Wilbes.

35

47. Reislied.

Peter Benoit.

Wij rei-zen om te lee-ren door heel
het land,— en heb-ben als wij kee-ren ook meer
ver-stand. Naar 't Oos-ten en 't Zai-deu, op weg—
naar de Wa-len. Ooh, jon-gens! wat zien
wij daar ber-gen en da-len, wat inlij-
nen van ko-len, ar-duin en me-taal... Dat
geeft ook de zie-len wat ij-zer en staal—

2.

Kom West, naar de Zee, door de Vlaamsche landouwen;
Kom Noord, naar de Schelde, om er schepen te aanschouwen
Die stoomen en zeilen, onspronkeld van schuim,
Met vlaggen in 't want en met schiffen in 't ruim.

3.

Hoe weeft men het kleergoed, waarmede wij pronken?
Fabrieken, wat kracht doet uw wicken zoo ronken?
Hoe schept men het gaslicht, hoe giet men het bronzen?
Geen werkhuis in 't land of 't gast open voor ons!

4.

Maakt reizen verstandig, ook vrij maakt het reizen!
In Brussel heeft 't volk als de Koning paleizen!
In Gent Artevelde, den vader des lands,
In Antwerpen Rubens, zijn roem en zijn glans!

F. De Geyter.

Sheetmusic by Peter Benoit, "Wij reizen om te leeren" (We travel to learn) in F. De Bom, De kleine zanger en andere kinderliederen, Antwerpen, Faes, s.d.

obedient voice in manuals, this letter foregrounds an almost symbolic, sacred child whose imagined, yet recorded voice serves to illustrate educational ideals (the rather angry exclamation marks seem to be the result of the father's listening rather than the little girl's telling).

Contrasting with the angelic little girl whispering educational truths in her father's ear, a certain Frans Vandael, a policeman, represented his thirteen-year-old son as a neglected, rational speaker. His letter to the Antwerp mayor consisted mainly of a long quotation preserving what his son reportedly told him at home. The letter reminds of the kinds of eye-witness reports that policemen would have been used to taking down. Vandael the father even indicates that he did not believe his son at first, but 'investigated' the story⁶¹. The attention Vandael grants his son's words becomes even more obvious in his charge that the teacher, unlike himself, had not "given [young Vandael] the time" to explain that his seemingly disruptive behaviour was actually very orderly. "Look how he expresses it", Vandael noted in his letter.

It was in the singing course of Mr Leenaerts. My satchel was hanging off the back of my

chair, and the boy behind me would not stop kicking it, so the bag kept hitting my arm. I turned around and told him to stop fooling around like this. Mr Leenaerts saw me (that I was not paying attention) and made me stand in the back of the class as a punishment⁶².

Feeling wrongly accused by both Mr Leenaerts and another teacher in the classroom (who then punished him for walking to the back of the class), the young Vandael had decided to protest his treatment in the headmaster's office, but, according to the story quoted by his father, never got the chance to do so.

"When I was called inside, Mr. Rensberg [the other teacher present in Mr Leenaerts classroom] said, 'There's Vandael, who has done nothing but fool around for two weeks'. Hereupon Mr Peeters jumped up, gave me no time to explain the issue, hit me on the cheek and chased me out of his office".

This accusation was later repeated when the father wrote to the mayor to relate that he had told the teachers that he "disapproved of their behaviour, (...) and that they should have listened to my son before turning him away in this way"⁶³. The words of father and son echo each other in this letter, highlighting the

61. Letter from Frans Vandael to the mayor, 3 April 1895. (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/12 A). "Aan dit vertelsel gaf ik geen geloof, en ging zelfs op onderzoek, en bevond gezegdens van mijnen zoon waarheid". **62.** Ibid. "Ziehier hoe hij zich uitdrukt : "Het was zangles, gegeven door den heer Leenaerts, mijnen boekenzak hing aan de rugleuning, den jongen achter mij geplaatst deed niets als er tegen stampen, hierdoor sloeg den zak gedurig tegen mijnen arm, ik zag om en vermaande hem van op te houden met aldus te spelen. Mijnheer Leenaerts zag zulks (dat ik geene aandacht nam) en bestrafte mij met mij achter de klas te doen gaan staan (...) Toen ik binnengeropen werd zegde M Van Rensenberg. 'Ziehier Van Dael welke sinds 14 dagen niets doet als spelen'. Daarop sprong mr Peeters recht, gaf mij den tijd niet om mijn geval uit te leggen en bracht mij eenen slag op de kaak toe en joeg mij uit zijn bureel". **63.** Ibid. "Ik heb dit geval aan den heer Peeters geschreven, hem zeggende dat ik het gedrag van beide laak, en zulke methode van onderwijs niet schoon vond, en hij mijnen zoon had moeten aanhoren alvorens hem op zulke wijze weg te jagen".

father's close attention to his son's story and analysis of the facts. At the end of the letter it becomes clear that Vandael's persistent correspondence on the issue is based on the disregard he observed not only towards his son, but also towards himself. The teacher had reportedly told him to "retract his letter first", thereby attempting to silence the pupil's father as he had silenced the boy⁶⁴.

Vandael junior is, in fact, the only example in the Antwerp archives of a child speaking in the classroom : according to his own account, he had turned around to tell the boy behind him to stop bothering him⁶⁵. It would indeed have been difficult to speak out of turn in the classroom, where the spatial organization ensured silence to a high degree. A brochure for classroom furniture, sent to municipal schools in 1873, described the ideal classroom organization and atmosphere, which their furniture represented, as follows : "The teacher can dominate the whole class at a glance. He can prevent pupils talking to each other easily as well. Silence that brings order and attention is assured, circulation is not hindered and repression can be immediate"⁶⁶.

It seems that such complete order could not always be achieved, yet teachers often managed to silence pupils posthumously

by reducing their words to meaningless gestures and movements or even by suggesting the removal of letters recording children's speech⁶⁷. Parents, who were more likely to record their children's speech in correspondence, often did so in an attempt to speak 'for' their children. However, as the secular Jacques Beunis shows⁶⁸, concerns for a child's education could easily lead to a more complex way of silencing the child's voice. By staging his daughter's speech as a symbol of obedience and innocence, a parent effectively robs her of the capacity to allocate meaning to her own sounds. Speaking 'for' a child, to a degree, denied her the ability to speak for herself and hid the sound of her proper voice.

III. Children recording : putting on a voice ?

Not all of the school's archival documents were written by adult hands. At the end of the nineteenth century (from the 1880s onward), the Antwerp primary schools took their pupils on excursions to Brussels, the Ardennes and the Belgian coast, during which the pupils would act as reporters⁶⁹. They were urged to take notes during the trip and after returning home, turn their notes into a proper narrative and the excursion into an orderly story. Many

64. *Ibid.* "Nu heb ik zelfs naar M Peeters geweest om de noodige stukken, om hem op de gemeenteschool n°9 te plaatsen, maar hij blijft mij die weigeren en zend mij wandelen zeggende "trek eerste uwen brief in, en dan zal ik zien, en dan kunt gij schrijven aan den heer burgemeester zooveel gij wilt". 65. *Ibid.* "ik zag om en vermaande hem van op te houden met aldus te spelen". 66. Brochure 'Belot', 1873 (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/18 A). 67. On the request to retract a former letter to the school, see the letter cited above from Frans Vandael to the mayor, 3 April 1895 (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/12 A). 68. Letter from Jacques Beunis to the alderman of education, 15 October 1882 (MA 223/4 B). 69. NINA NEYRINGCK, *Kinderen en natievorming in België in de negentiende eeuw. De invloed en betekenis van schoolreizen*, unpublished MA thesis, KU Leuven, 2013, p. 72.

of these reports have been preserved in the Antwerp City Archives, and they present a rare example of children's writing in the nineteenth century⁷⁰. The stories are, of course, based on collective and controlled experiences and are therefore less personal than letters or diaries, but they do present us with documents in which a young primary character in a story is identical to its author. Here, at least, children seem to have had a chance to record their own thoughts and their own voices in an educational context. Yet in reading the stories, one wonders if these young reporters were not putting on a voice for the benefit of their intended audience. The reports of school excursions were directed to the city government, with the explicit intention of expressing gratitude to the generous benefactors who had made the trips possible. The texts were written in the classroom under a teacher's supervision. Some show signs of corrections. From each Antwerp school, only three reports were ultimately sent to the mayor and the aldermen, suggesting that these were the exemplary texts, written by exemplary and obedient pupils. In fact, only the well-behaved were allowed to go on excursions in the first place⁷¹. It is also clear that the reports served as an exercise in style and composition in which conventional narrative structures and literary tropes were practised, resulting in a high level of uniformity among the different reports. Even if the texts seem to represent a personal perspective in which pupils describe their own experiences, those experiences

ended up being eerily similar to one another once they were written down.

The reports were 'streamlined' by teachers and pupils alike, yet much of this process was hidden by an insistent tone of childishness. The voice these young children were 'putting on' in their writing is, surprisingly perhaps, one of continued infantilism. They were not "conjuring more adult selves"⁷². Only a handful of lists of those who participated in the excursions survive, but they suggest that the young travellers were at the end of their (primary) school career, around 14 to 15 years of age⁷³. Yet despite being at an age when many of their peers were gainfully employed, the students convey an image of small children frolicking in the fields, marvelling at the speed of a train and sweetly singing songs for their hosts. One boys' school included a report by an eight-year-old. It is a fairly grubby letter, full of spelling errors and ink blotches, but it effectively communicates a sense of childish authenticity and a genuine attempt to learn and obey, which seems to have been its point.

In contrast with the general, constructed 'cuteness' of the reports are the mature first few lines of most of these documents. Many pupils started their reports with a formal expression of gratitude to the mayor and aldermen. Young Hendrik Bellens wrote that he saw it as his "duty to thank you for the benefaction you have given me by allowing me and other

70. SANCHEZ-EPPLER, *Dependent States*, p. 3-67. **71.** "Het spreekt vanzelf dat ze zich dan ook gedurende het afgelopen jaar waardig moeten gemaakt hebben van deze gunst, anders ware zulke belooning gansch ondoelmatig". Note on the school excursions, 1882 (Antwerp City Archives MA 223/21 B). **72.** SANCHEZ-EPPLER, *Dependent States*, p. 20. **73.** A number of young girls attending teacher training colleges seem to have participated as well.

pupils to go to Brussels free of charge⁷⁴. Putting on a schoolish infantile voice thus went hand in hand with the projection of a more mature future self. In the reports the writers consciously posed as the kind of children one would expect to read about in a school manual : eager to please, eager to grow and eager to learn. Their reports also showed how they assimilated ideological discourses on the politics of education, as they reflected on the “hateful school laws” while visiting Brussels⁷⁵. The childish personae that emerge from the reports very obviously precede the cultivation of engaged and informed citizens. The travelling pupils, who knew they had been introduced to the landscape of ‘their’ country, consciously presented themselves as worthy representatives of the ‘future of the nation’.

In so doing, their voices play a small but significant role : children regularly reported having sung during their excursions. This seems like an odd thing to include in the narrative. Singing did not introduce new knowledge, did not allow for further expressions of gratitude (as the long descriptions of copious meals did) and rarely served as a way of depicting

happiness and enjoyment of the trip. What it did show was that teachers had used the school trip as an opportunity to imbue the pupils with patriotism : children would sing about the country and its beauty while experiencing both. According to the principles of the then-popular object education, this would directly affect the emotions and thereby instil in the children love of the fatherland and a sense of citizenship⁷⁶. It is quite likely that the young singers were unaware of this; one pupil added to his report that he had “almost forgotten to mention that we have sung the *Brabançonne*”, possibly at the behest of a conscientious teacher⁷⁷. Apart from the collective singing voice, individual narrative voices were mentioned as well, although these would only resound outside the school. Children would, according to their own reports, chatter away during the trips, and also after returning home. Theresia Demeulemeester remembered having “chatted with the head teachers about the useful things every school excursion brings⁷⁸, while Felix Augusteyns noted he had so “much to recount” that he had to wait until the next day because he was too tired to tell the whole story⁷⁹.

74. H. Bellens, report of a schooltrip to Brussels, 26 July 1877 (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/21 C), “Ik acht het mij ten plicht u te bedanken voor de weldaad, die gij mij verleend hebt door mij, even als nog andere leerlingen der gemeentescholen, kosteloos naar Brussel te hebben laten gaan”. 75. J. Cool, report of a school trip to Brussels, 1884 (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/22 C). 76. This view was expressed in numerous articles in educational journals concerning the practice of school excursions. See e.g. “Kan Vaderlandsliefde op de lagere school onderwezen worden?”, in *Ons Woord*, (1896), p. 120-121. “Het staatsbestuur EISCHT het aanleeren, beter gezegd het opgieten, van vaderlandsliefde. Men beginne met het kind zijn geboorteland te laten zien. Daarvoor behoort reizen -kosteloos reizen- in het kanton, in de provincie, door het land”. 77. W. Van Lint, report of a school trip to Brussels, July 1877, “Maar ik zou u nog vergeten te zeggen dat wij na het eten het Vaderlandslied zongen en ons nog fel vermaakten”. (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/21 C). 78. T. Demeulemeester, report of a school trip to Namur and Dinant, 30 October 1882 (MA 223/21 C) : “tot aan Brussel rijdende, klaptten wij met onze hoofdonderwijzers over het nuttige dat elke schoolreis te weeg brengt”. 79. F. Augusteyns, report of a school trip to Brussels, 9 July 1877, “Dat ik veel te vertellen had, maar dat de vermoeidheid mij het verhaal mijner reis deed uitstellen tot den volgenden dag, hoef ik wel niet te zeggen”. (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/21 C).

What these projections of narratorship suggest is, firstly, that the children presented themselves as potential speakers, albeit in limited contexts. Secondly, it draws our attention to the possible difference between what these young reporters considered 'their' spoken story and the formalised narratives they produced in school. In the reports, it seems, children did not cite themselves: their reports were not copies of the vocal account they had performed at home, but rather rehearsed adult discourses about an 'educatable' childhood, its tropes adapted to their concrete travel experiences. Even the best pupils sometimes slipped out of this role, however. Despite the almost perfect assimilation of a discourse of infinite childish wonder, some pupils reported to have been unimpressed or downright bored by parts of the trip. Of Dinant, young Marten Prey noted that "because it is a small city with nothing in it but rocks, we went to see those and then left"⁸⁰. Whether they expressed their disappointment more audibly during the trip is unclear, but their ability to slip these small phrases of rebellion into a perfectly crafted narrative of obedience betrays some experience with the tactical use of language.

IV. Conclusion

Could young subalterns speak then? And can they, through the archive, still speak to us? Keeping an ear out for children's voices in the Antwerp school archives shows that children's speech was a matter of constant interaction with the disciplinary context. Pupils were

constantly coming to terms with the norms and rules around them. The most obvious example of this struggle is the young Vandael, who was vocally and quite rationally questioning the logic of the school's system of obedience and justice. Yet the young boy who took part in singing the *Brabançonne* and then forgot he had done so, the little girl who told her father all about the content of her religious education and the numerous boys who got bored looking at rocks in Dinant were equally involved in a sometimes loud conversation with the primary school's educational discourse. They indeed speak to us as people inhabiting these central institutions of organized normativity while remaining on the 'margins', attached to the 'unfinished' state of childhood they may be less willing to leave than the adults around them may have liked to believe⁸¹.

The educational discourse of these adults represented socialization as a goal, a prized outcome of a successful process of learning and acquiring the skills to participate in a gentrified society. Unconventional utterances – yelling in the schoolyard, for example – were therefore categorised as a failure to assimilate. Within the reigning discourse, which held that education rather than punishment would set these children straight, the shouting of a boy like Jan Negers was heard as a sign of his continued lack of education and skill. According to his teachers, Jan could indeed not (yet) speak. And because they did not hear his voice as speech, it has not been 'recorded' as such. The continuous attempts of young boys to make themselves heard, however, can

⁸⁰. Report of a school trip to Namur and Dinant, 15 October 1882, M. Preym (Antwerp City Archives, MA 223/21 C). "Daar dit een kleine stad is en niets voornaams in heeft dan rotsen gingen wij deze zien en daarna verlieten wij Dinant om 1 uur". ⁸¹. Hooks, "marginality as [a] site of resistance".

be traced in the sparse descriptions of their disobedience and in their own insistence in their excursion reports that they had “a lot to recount”. This last group especially seems to have been well aware that they were still acquiring the command of language – a process supervised by people who controlled their audibility – and that this acquisition would not necessarily give them access to a ‘language of command’⁸² : as children, they were expected to speak in a different tone, to use another – more innocent – mode.

To a large degree, then, we can indeed measure these young subalterns’ silences by the length of their reports and by the absence of direct transcriptions of their voices in adults’ correspondence. Their subaltern voices have been erased, either because they went unrecorded (consciously ignored because of their rebelliousness or simply unheard through lack of interest or comprehension) or because they were remoulded in the image of innocence to become a symbol of childhood.

Where we can retrace children’s voices, they seem to have been directed at their inaudible peers or to have resounded at home, in a domestic context rather than at school. Parents’ attempts to speak for their children occasionally created an acoustic space for young voices, contrasting children’s speech with that of teachers. Exploring these spaces for the sounds of a child’s voice is therefore not only a matter of measuring silence, but also calls for a critique of what in the past has been termed ‘noise’. Voices from the margins have been distorted, rather than simply silenced, through measures of authority and discipline, which may allow us to recover at least some of them. It is crucial, however, that “recordings are not adequately understood as reproductions of performances, they represent performances through complex processes of cultural signification”⁸³. This is true of acoustic recordings, as Nicholas Cook suggested, but a similar stance toward the written ‘record’ can be helpful in re-interpreting the meaning of noise and silence in the archive.

JOSEPHINE HOEGAERTS (°1983) is a research fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Her research focuses on gender, politics and vocal culture in nineteenth century Europe. Recent publications include “Speaking Like Intelligent Men. Vocal Articulations of Authority and Identity in the House of Commons in the Nineteenth Century” in *Radical History Review* no. 121 (2015), p. 123-144 and *Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830-1910 : Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in Belgium*. *Genders and Sexualities in History*, London, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2014.

82. COHN, “The Command of Language and the Language of Command”. **83.** COOK, *Beyond the Score*, p. 6.