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Good Girls

Silence, Speech, and Normality in Tove Jansson's "Det osynliga barnet" and Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus' *Snill*

Abstract: This article presents a comparative analysis of Finland-Swedish Tove Jansson's short story "Det osynliga barnet" ("The Invisible Child," 1962) and Norwegian Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus' picturebook Snill *(Kind, 2002), both of which portray metaphorical depictions of girls who deviate from social norms. The article shows how the protagonists, Ninny and Lussi, fall into silence as a response to emotional trauma and marginalization, before eventually reclaiming their voices. Drawing on critical disability studies, this study examines how the girls' silences and reappearances function narratively and aesthetically. The analysis focuses on how their incapacities are depicted and how these depictions intersect with notions of power, gender, and normality. By investigating the ways in which silence operates as both a narrative problem and a metaphor for trauma and invisibility, the article explores how the stories structure and resolve this problem through the girls' eventual "recovery." The study argues that while their regaining of voice may seem emancipatory, it can also be read as a form of adaptation to updated yet still coercive norms of girlhood. The comparative approach also enables a reflection on how discourses surrounding discipline, conformity, and resistance have shifted over time. Ultimately, the article highlights the interplay between silence, speech, and normality, and the extent to which these stories both reproduce and challenge dominant tropes.*

Keywords: Tove Jansson, Gro Dahle, Svein Nyhus, silence, speech, invisibility, trauma, critical disability studies, norms of disability

 Citation: *Barnboken – tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning/Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, Vol. 49, 2026 http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v49.1089

This study analyzes two children's stories that share strong thematic similarities but were published forty years apart: Finland-Swedish Tove Jansson's short story "Det osynliga barnet" ("The Invisible Child," 1962) and Norwegian Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus' picturebook *Snill* (Kind, 2002).[1] "Det osynliga barnet" tells the story of Ninny, a girl who has become invisible after being subjected to constant ironic remarks by her former caregiver. Taken in by the Moomin family, Ninny gradually begins to reappear as she is met with warmth and care, eventually regaining both visibility and speech through an emotional outburst. *Snill*, in turn, tells the story of Lussi, a girl who is excessively obedient, quiet, and compliant. Praised by parents and teachers alike for being "snill" (kind), Lussi gradually becomes so silent that she disappears into the wall, literally blending into the wallpaper. Only through a violent and disruptive outburst does she reclaim her voice and presence.

Both stories thus center on main characters who fall into silence as a result of how they have been treated, before eventually gathering the strength to escape their subordinate positions. The focus of this study is to investigate how a combined perspective from critical disability studies and gender studies can shed light on the norms governing what it means to be an able girl in different social and historical contexts. Within critical disability studies, it is common to examine how various metaphors are used to depict children who deviate from the norm (Couser 142; Mitchell and Snyder 222; Beckett et al. 380). The narratives analyzed in this study employ both silence and invisibility as symbolic representations of being positioned outside the rest of society. While both would be possible objects of analysis, the study focuses on speech and silence, since invisibility is ultimately interpreted as a consequence of the protagonists' inability to make their voices heard. A key concept in this regard is *literary selective mutism* (Price), which is used to illuminate how silence functions narratively and aesthetically in the texts.

Previous analyses of the stories have emphasized the girls' reclaiming of voice as uplifting from a gender perspective (Alfredsson; Bjørlo and Johnsrud; Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye; Krogstad; Ommundsen; Taipale; Westin). From the combined gender and critical disability perspective employed here, however, there is more to be problematized. A core assumption within critical disability studies is that society itself plays a crucial role in producing ability and disability through the conditions it offers individuals (Schalk). This assumption becomes particularly productive when applied to

stories about girls whose silence is constructed as a problem for their surroundings. The forty-year temporal distance between the two works also enables a comparative reading that highlights shifts in gender norms over time, that is, how the girls' abilities and disabilities are tied to specific historical contexts (Keith). A central question, therefore, is whether the transformations the girls undergo should be understood as steps toward liberation or as forms of adaptation to new normative expectations. To address this question, the study combines critical disability studies with other strands of critical theory, drawing on Michel Foucault's and Slavoj Žižek's analyses of subjectivity and power, as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Jacques Rancière's discussions of power, speech, and silence.

The aim of the study is to illuminate which tropes of silence, speech, and normality the narratives challenge and reproduce, by answering the following questions: How does Ninny's and Lussi's silence function narratively and aesthetically? How can their regaining of voice be understood from a critical disability perspective?

The following two sections, "Literary Functions of Disability" and "(Un)taming Female Subjects," first outline critical disability perspectives commonly used in literary analyses and then review previous research on "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill*, which is subsequently problematized through critical theories of subjectivity and power. These sections are followed by three analytical sections and a concluding discussion, in which the theoretical perspectives are brought into dialogue with close analyses of the narratives' texts and images. Key concepts for the literary analysis include Kristin Hallberg's *ikonotext* (iconotext), which can be helpful when describing effects that arise when text and image correspond, complement, or contradict one another (Sundmark), and Ulla Rhedin's *det konsekventa barnperspektivet* (the consistently child-centered perspective), which captures how picturebooks employ aesthetic strategies designed to reflect children's subjective experiences of the world (37–64).

Literary Functions of Disability

A central premise within critical disability studies is that disabilities of various kinds should not be viewed as individual defects, but as products of societal injustice (Siebers 1–33). Whether a person is considered able or disabled thus depends less on that individual's characteristics and more on the surrounding society's capacity to accommodate their needs (Schalk). Studies of representations of dis-

ability in children's literature nevertheless show that there is a long-standing tradition of using disabled characters in supporting roles in ways that maintain and reproduce ableist dichotomies and notions of normality (Aho and Alter 304). Moreover, research demonstrates how disability often serves a narrative function, in the sense that various forms of disability become the "problem" that drives the narrative forward toward a resolution, often in the form of a restoration of normality within the story's framework (Wohlmann and Rana 5). Important studies in this context include David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), which explores how disability can function as a literary device, and Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), which demonstrates how disabled characters introduce narrative and aesthetic disruptions in literary texts.

Furthermore, disability is often portrayed metaphorically and symbolically in children's literature. For example, studies have shown how literary depictions of disabled children frequently evoke associations with secluded underwater worlds or birds (Pacelli 43; Price 216). From a critical disability perspective, such metaphorical representations have been subject to critique. On the one hand, they risk producing essentializing and mystifying characterizations of disability that reinforce the othering of those who fall outside the norm (Couser 142; Mitchell and Snyder 222). On the other hand, they may trivialize and undermine the gravity of lived experiences of impairment within ableist societies (Beckett et al. 380).

The two works at the center of this study, "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill*, employ different metaphorical interpretations of what it means to persist in a subordinate position. Susan Louise Stewart describes invisibility as a classic metaphor in children's and young adult literature, often used to articulate social critique. Several studies further demonstrate how being rendered invisible is closely linked to being devoiced, and how both silence and invisibility operate as metaphors for marginalization and vulnerability in children's and young adult literature (Druker et al.; Aho and Alter 308). In the research anthology *Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature* (2021), the editors emphasize that "[a]s a verb, silence is strongly related to power, since it refers to prohibiting or preventing someone from speaking" (Druker et al. 14). From this perspective, Ninny and Lussi are silenced – and thereby rendered invisible – because they are unable to occupy a viable subject position within an oppressive social order.

The depictions of Ninny and Lussi also draw on well-established, and often psychoanalytically informed, tropes of trauma, as discussed by Danielle E. Price in her article on what she terms literary selective mutism. Price examines young adult literature portraying children with selective mutism and analyzes how this condition is typically represented in fiction. According to Price, trauma is presented as both the cause and the resolution of the characters' silence, and she further notes that the onset of selective mutism in literary narratives often coincides with the onset of puberty. While Price's concept is useful for identifying and discussing recurring tropes associated with literary representations of silence and trauma, Ninny's and Lussi's silence is not explicitly framed as selective mutism in either "Det osynliga barnet" or *Snill*. In this study, the girls' silence is approached in a more figurative sense and in combination with a gender perspective. From this angle, the narratives are read as staging inabilities to live up to historically situated norms of girlhood, manifested through what Price describes as a "consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there is an expectation for speaking" (209). Silence thus functions less as a diagnosable condition than as a narrative and aesthetic expression of constrained subjectivity under normative social expectations.

(Un)taming Female Subjects

Psychoanalytic perspectives do not only influence narratives about silent children (Price); they have also been a recurring feature in earlier research on Jansson's Moomin books more broadly (Almqvist 74–104). Boel Westin notes how the story of Ninny is frequently used in psychotherapeutic contexts (56), while Joona Taipale draws on the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to show how "Det osynliga barnet" can be interpreted as a story about the crucial role of social mirroring in the development of a coherent sense of self. What unites these studies is their understanding of Ninny's story as an uplifting depiction of breaking free from a subordinate position. Taipale, for instance, argues that Ninny's time with the Moomin family can be read as a form of therapeutic process that enables her to reconnect with her aggression and creativity. This broadly progressive interpretation of the story's message is further underscored by the fact that in 2017 "Det osynliga barnet" became the focus of a campaign aimed at helping women in underprivileged countries overcome violence and discrimination (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 317).

The other narrative at the center of this study, *Snill*, has similarly been the subject of a campaign, which in the early 2010s sought to strengthen the self-confidence of young women in rural India (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 186). Like "Det osynliga barnet," *Snill* has been interpreted in previous research as a progressive story of female liberation (Alfredsson; Bjørlo and Johnsrud; Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye; Krogstad; Ommundsen). Eva Maagerø and Guri Lorentzen Østbye, for example, describe *Snill* as "a liberation project" (171), while Johan Alfredsson emphasizes how Lussi, by breaking free from suffocating patriarchal normativity, regains control over her body and her subjectivity (174).

These interpretations of *Snill* are all well-grounded and supported by the narrative. However, from a critical disability perspective, it is productive to further interrogate what norms of disability and ability emerge not only in *Snill* itself but also in its scholarly reception. Maria Jönsson has pointed out that children's literature which seeks to critique norms inevitably produces new norms in the process (13–16). Examining earlier analyses of *Snill*, one can observe how contours of an updated ideal of girlhood are constructed, where attributes such as "active" (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 170, 180, 187, 188; Ommundsen 116), "independent" (Krogstad 10), "strong," and "self-confident" (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 170; Bjørlo and Johnsrud 249) are foregrounded as desirable qualities. Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye describe how Lussi's "inner will to survive" enables her to move from a position of victimhood to becoming "bold and brave" (185). By the end of the narrative, Lussi has been transformed into a "sound" and "more natural, realistic child," who is "dirty and free" and "able to change [her] own life" (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 187, 183, 180, 188).

Lois Keith has previously combined gender perspectives with critical disability studies to show how classic fiction for girls aimed to cultivate virtues such as patience and self-restraint. These ideals are clearly not those promoted in "Det osynliga barnet" or *Snill*, nor in their dominant scholarly interpretations. The transformed Lussi is no longer timid, quiet, or restrained, but active, hungry, and dirty – traits that can certainly be read as progressive in relation to the ideals Keith describes (7). From another perspective, however, this new Lussi comes close to the ideal subject produced under neoliberalism, described by theorists such as Žižek and Foucault as an active, self-governing, and entrepreneurial individual who willingly assumes responsibility for his or her life project. Žižek argues that power has shifted from demanding obedience to encouraging

enjoyment: social authority no longer addresses us as subjects who must sacrifice themselves, but as subjects who should pursue pleasure. Similarly, Foucault describes how power increasingly operates through "soft governance," whereby political rationalities are internalized and experienced by individuals as their own authentic choices.

Against this backdrop, one may, following Cristina Santos, ask whether the girls in these narratives should be understood as "tamed" or "untamed." In *Untaming Girlhoods: Storytelling Female Adolescence* (2023), Santos argues that ostensibly progressive portrayals of "strong girl" protagonists may function as a marketable repackaging of hegemonic norms, presenting them as feminist and emancipatory while leaving underlying power structures intact (xiii). I aim to bring this critical sensibility to my readings of "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill*, as well as to my engagement with previous scholarship. At the same time, it is important to stress that liberation from normative systems often entails what Spivak terms a double bind: a situation in which all available courses of action simultaneously resist and reproduce hegemonic power. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), Spivak highlights the difficulty of speaking against domination without reinforcing the very structures one seeks to oppose. This predicament is echoed in Audre Lorde's well-known assertion that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (112, italics in original), by which she emphasizes that strategies and languages produced within dominant systems are structurally limited in their capacity to bring about genuine change. Rancière similarly draws attention to the political dimensions of speech, particularly how hegemonic power relations determine which utterances are recognized as legitimate speech and which are dismissed as mere "noise" (30). In the following analysis, these perspectives provide tools for examining whether Ninny's and Lussi's reclaiming of voice should be understood as resistance to, or adaptation within, hegemonic discourses.

Narrating Trauma

"Ni vet ju att folk lätt blir osynliga om man skrämmer dem tillräckligt ofta" ("You all know, don't you, that if people are frightened very often, they sometimes become invisible"), says the character Too-ticky in "Det osynliga barnet" when the reason behind Ninny's invisibility is brought up (Jansson 102/107). Too-ticky goes on to describe how an "iskall och ironisk" ("icily ironical") lady has frightened

Ninny into silence, until she began to "blekna i konturerna" ("fade around the edges"; 102/107–108). In this way, the story invites a trauma interpretation, similar to many stories about what Price refers to as literary selective mutism: Ninny has been subjected to a psychological trauma that has curtailed her abilities. That Ninny's timidity is voluntary is later suggested by Moominmamma: "Kanske hon vill vara osynlig ett slag" ("I believe she wants to be invisible for a while"; 105/111). From this perspective, Ninny's silence becomes selective, a form of self-defense against her former caregiver's ironic remarks.

A psychoanalytic reading also comes naturally in *Snill*, particularly when considering what the story conveys about Lussi's family relationships. Here, however, it is not a cruel lady but the narrator's voice itself that delivers the ironic tone:

> Oj oj oj for en flink liten pike!
> Gullet til moren sin.
> Solstrålen til faren sin.
> Fineste jenta på jord!
> Den lille perlen! Den lille stjernen!
> Har du sett slik en jente! (Dahle and Nyhus)
>
> (Oh oh oh what a good little girl!
> Mama's darling.
> Daddy's sunshine.
> The sweetest girl on earth!
> A little pearl! A little star!
> Have you ever seen such a girl!)

The irony arises in particular from the clash between text and image. While the verbal text conveys a cheerful and upbeat tone, the illustration shows Lussi sitting with a stiff smile between two preoccupied parents (image 1). Ulla Rhedin discusses how Dahle and Nyhus frequently employ a consistently child-centered perspective (37–64), which in this case affects the image's proportions: Lussi appears very small, especially in relation to her father's body, which extends out of the frame. In relation to the book's theme, this visual strategy intensifies Lussi's vulnerability as a character. In the margins of the illustration, the image also complements the verbal text by offering symbolic elements: a disconnected plug, reflecting the relationship between Lussi and her caregivers, and an amorphous mass floating above Lussi's head, reminiscent of a dark, ominous cloud. Later in the book, the narrator states that Lussi became "[s]å stille / at

Image 1. Lussi and her parents. From *Snill* (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. © Svein Nyhus.

plutselig en dag forsvant hun bare" ([s]o quiet / that suddenly one day she just disappeared; Dahle and Nyhus), which – just as in "Det osynliga barnet" – connects silence with invisibility (Druker et al.; Aho and Alter 308).

However, the stories' use of trauma serves not only a metaphorical but also a narrative function, which is common in stories about children who fall silent: "The plot proceeds as follows: a traumatic event; a child who stops speaking; a crisis; the child speaks" (Price 208). This pattern broadly applies not only to stories of silent children, but also to many fictional accounts of disability, which usually introduce "a problem, crisis, or deviance to be addressed, solved, or fixed in the course of a narrative" (Wohlmann and Rana 8). In this way, in both "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill*, it is the girls' inability to live up to certain norms that calls the story into being, which Mitchell and Snyder likewise have described as a common way of structuring narratives about children who deviate from the norm (228).

There is also a key difference here, rooted in the distinct contexts the two girls inhabit. Within the Moomin family, Ninny fails to live up to certain expectations of young girls – she is perceived as too quiet, too dull – whereas Lussi, although she meets all the expectations placed upon her, does so *too* well, to the extent that her silence and compliance lead to her being rendered invisible. In both cases,

silence is framed by the narrative as a problem: an inability that calls for some form of cure so that things may return to normal (Wohlmann and Rana 5). Moreover, it is not only the girls' inability to speak appropriately that is scrutinized. From a gender perspective, it is worth noting the emphasis placed on the girls' physical appearances, and what these representations reveal about historically situated expectations of girlhood. At one point, Moominmamma ponders whether it really matters if Ninny remains invisible: "kanske Ninni inte var särskilt vacker" ("perhaps Ninny wasn't very good-looking"; Jansson 114/119). The first thing Moomintroll says when Ninny's face finally begins to appear is "Hon är ju söt!" ("She's sweet!"; 116/123).[2] That Ninny turns out to be cute is a collective relief for everyone involved, as though an unattractive girl would itself be a breach of norms.

Lussi's appearance in *Snill* is scrutinized by the narrator even more intensely, as if through a magnifying glass:

> Se på neglene til Lussi.
> De er akkurat passe lange.
> Ikke for korte og ikke skjeve,
> ikke bit og ikke svarte.
> Og se på fingrene til Lussi!
> De er rosa og hvite.
> Og ikke er de oppe i nesa.
> Og ikke er de inne i munnen.
> De setter seg aldri fast i skitne hull. (Dahle and Nyhus)
>
> (Look at Lussi's nails.
> Just the right length.
> Not crooked or bent,
> not bitten or dirty.
> And look at Lussi's fingers!
> They are pink and white.
> And they're not up her nose.
> And they're not in her mouth.
> They never get stuck in dirty holes.)

This passage functions partly as a piece of foreshadowing as Lussi later musters the courage to actually pick her nose. It also, particularly through the last line's reference to fingers getting stuck in dirty holes, evokes connotations of sex and masturbation. Price notes that stories about silent children often take place during or just before puberty, a time when issues of socialization become more urgent,

or at least must be renegotiated (210). According to Santos, puberty marks the loss of a girl's childhood innocence, which thereby "positions her as an object to be tamed and confined within prescriptive socio-cultural codes" (64). The characters' and narrator's preoccupation with Ninny's and Lussi's appearances can be interpreted as expressions of such norm-enforcing socio-cultural codes – codes that ultimately reflect a collective anxiety over girls' puberty. Perhaps the real trauma underlying these stories, which both secondary characters and narrators desperately try to avoid, is the looming possibility that the girls' cuteness might not blossom into feminine beauty.

The Violence of Silence

Previous research has offered many insightful observations about how the quiet and timid protagonists in these respective stories are portrayed. With regard to the iconotext, "Det osynliga barnet" is characterized by a more symmetric relationship between text and image than *Snill*, where tension and divergence between the two modes play a more prominent role. In Jansson's short story, Ninny is introduced with a hunched back and her hands in her lap, curled up as if in defense. Her body is visible, but her face is absent – thereby lacking individuality, and she hardly appears as a unique subject in her own right.

Lussi, in turn, is symbolically associated with a bird (Krogstad 8), which aligns with the literary tropes commonly associated with silenced children (Price 216). Already on the book cover (image 2), Lussi is presented as a cute little doll with big eyes and clothing that (similar to Ninny's) evokes the buttoned-up female ideals of earlier times (Ommundsen 105). At the same time, she is surrounded by suns that give off an unsettling impression – they are too sharp, too many (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 174). According to my interpretation, the suns evoke associations with circular saws, tying into the metaphorical imagery of work tools and other sharp objects used in the book to describe Lussi's silence:

> For Lussi er fange i veggen.
> Så stille så stille
> som tenner og kniver og blankt metall.
> Stille som pigger og nåler og
> sylskarpe negler. (Dahle and Nyhus)

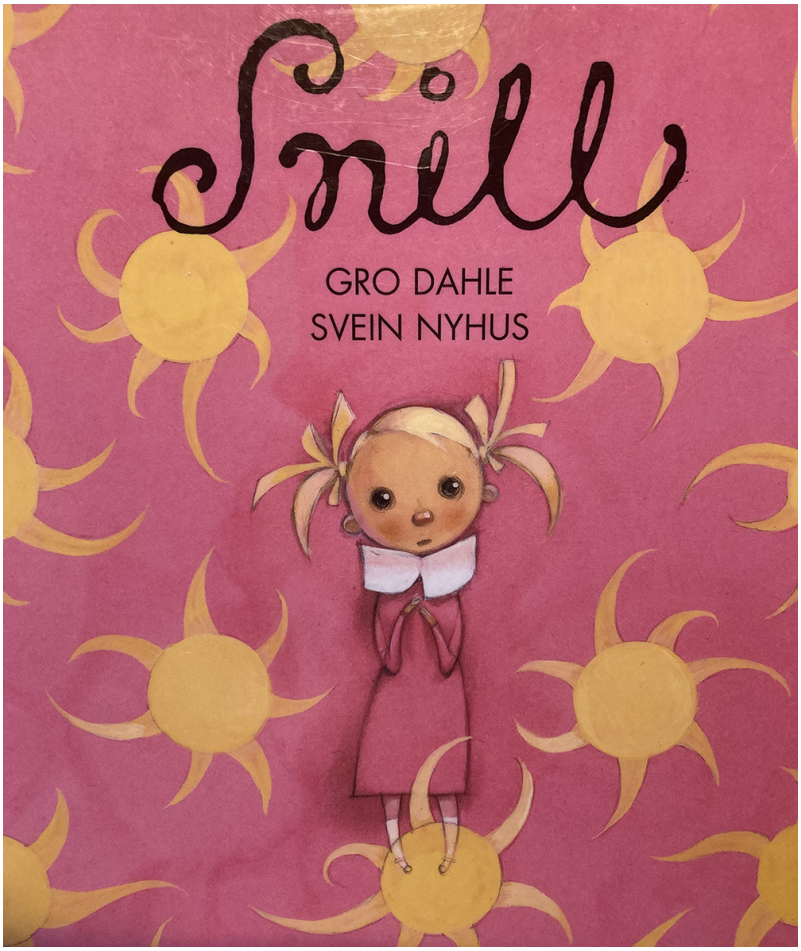

Image 2. Lussi on the cover of *Snill* (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. © Svein Nyhus.

> (For Lussi is trapped in the wall.
> So silent, so silent
> like teeth and knives and polished metal.
> Silent like thumbtacks and needles and
> razor-sharp nails.)

Alfredsson, who focuses on the poetic devices in *Snill*, notes that the same phrase – "Det er jenta si, det!" (She is such a good girl!) – is repeated in the story, both to describe Lussi when she is submissive and after she has been liberated (173). According to Alfredsson, this can be interpreted as a form of feminist reappropriation: "the same language, the same words […] turning out to contain the very means Lussi needs to break free, and reclaim power over her own body, and

her own subjectivity" (174).[3] To Alfredsson's interpretation, one can add that the same goes for the metaphors concerning sharp objects. The same violent metaphors used to describe Lussi's silence are later used to describe her outburst:

> Hun blir til en hammer. Hun slår og hun slår.
> Hun blir til en syl og et bor og en hakke.
> […]
> Hun blir til en saks
> og klipper tapeten. (Dahle and Nyhus)
>
> (She becomes a hammer. She hits and she hits.
> She becomes an awl and a drill and a pickaxe.
> […]
> She becomes a pair of scissors
> and cuts the wallpaper.)

In "Det osynliga barnet," the violence associated with silence is not depicted using the same kind of maximalist metaphors. Ninny's silence is of the quiet and pitiable sort, which "verkade nedslående" ("had a depressing effect") on those around her (Jansson 113/119). Her awkwardness is clearly a breach of the norms of disability and ability that prevail in the environment she finds herself in. Price notes how selective mutism is defined as a "consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there is an expectation for speaking" (209), which, in a figurative sense, applies to Ninny. The narrator notes that "[h]on skrattade aldrig på rätt ställe" ("[s]he never laughed at the right places"), and when she does engage in play, "hade [man] en bestämd känsla av att hon lekte av artighet och inte för att ha roligt" ("it was clear to all that she played only from politeness and not to have fun"; Jansson 112–113/118). Drawing on Žižek (104), the social context Ninny is now part of is judging her for *not* engaging in play, for not being able to enjoy herself.

As I touched on in the previous section, Ninny's problem is thus that she *fails* in relation to prevailing norms, whereas Lussi's problem is that she *succeeds* all too well – in both cases, however, the consequence is that their behavior causes unease among those around them. Placing the stories side by side thus offers an interesting perspective on issues of coercive norms and double binds: one is not allowed to fail to live up to norms, but one is also not allowed to fulfill them in a way that becomes a nuisance to others.

Another interesting aspect that emerges when comparing the two stories is that while Ninny has ended up in a context where her silence is seen as provocative, everyone (at least initially) is very pleased with Lussi. Whereas Ninny has been punished for speaking, Lussi has rather been rewarded for silence. Mitchell and Snyder discuss how "disability provides an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body" (225). From such a historicizing perspective, one can interpret the way power is exerted over Ninny and Lussi as an expression of differences between forms of hard and soft governance – that is, between explicit directives and non-binding rules that are nevertheless expected to be followed (Foucault 231–241). While Ninny is explicitly punished and thus aware that she is misbehaving in the eyes of the ironic lady, Lussi is rather encouraged into silence in a way that leads her to internalize the norm, without any opportunity to reflect on what she is doing. Based on Foucault, one could describe it as follows: while Ninny obeys out of fear of punishment, Lussi obeys because she has learned to want to obey.

Interestingly, the narrative voice in *Snill*, before Lussi's outburst, participates in this exercise of soft governance through its – often contradictory and thereby ironic – remarks. By cheerfully reassuring Lussi that she is indeed a good girl, it simultaneously interpellates her as a compliant subject:

> For Lussi gjør alt som hun skal.
> Se som hun smiler!
> Skriver pent, leser fra boka,
> nikker og smiler og rekker opp hånden.
> Pene hånden.
> Ja, se på Lussi.
> Det er jenta si, det!
> Det er jenta si! (Dahle and Nyhus)
>
> (Lussi does exactly as she should.
> Look how she smiles!
> Writes neatly, reads from the book,
> nods and smiles and raises her hand.
> Her lovely hand.
> Yes, look at Lussi.
> She is such a good girl!
> She really is!)

In light of this distinction between hard and soft governance, one can interpret it as a more elusive and pervasive form of power being portrayed in *Snill*. In "Det osynliga barnet," it is a malicious fictional character – the ironic lady – who causes the protagonist's silence, whereas the narrator in *Snill* can be interpreted not as "a human character at all, but rather a structure of societal and cultural expectations not attributable to any single source" (Quayson 154). From the perspective of this study, this means that the narrator in passages such as these articulates patriarchal and ableist notions of what constitutes a beautiful and well-spoken young female, or in other words, a "good girl."

Dirty Subjects

What, then, is it that makes the girls visible again? Well, speech, of course. Viewing speech as a kind of remedy can in itself be seen as a psychoanalytic motif, as Taipale points out (20), evoking Freud's famous claim that psychoanalysis is a "speech-cure." Turning to Price, one can also note how the crisis that triggers the girls' speech and visibility structures the narrative in a way that is familiar from children's and young adult literature. Paradoxically, the solution to their trauma comes in the form of a new trauma, a sudden and violent turning point. Both of their developments thus recall well-known tropes associated with psychoanalysis: while Ninny's progress can be seen as analogous to the therapeutic process (Taipale 19), Lussi reaches a kind of Freudian boiling point where all her repressed emotions are released in an aggressive outburst. And even though Ninny's transformation is indeed more gradual than Lussi's, one may note that it also culminates in an aggressive act, namely that she bites Moominpappa in the tail.

For both protagonists, the reclaiming of voice and visibility nevertheless constitutes an empowering disruption, a transformation from subaltern to subject. From a critical disability perspective, the girls are not positioned as fully recognized subjects for as long as they are marked by an inability to speak appropriately; instead, they appear as subjects in need of being cured so that normality can be reinstated (Mitchell and Snyder 228; Wohlmann and Rana 5). Visually and aesthetically, this moment entails that Ninny literally regains her face.

In the depiction of Lussi's outburst, shifts in perspective and proportion function as stylistic devices (Bakke 42). Lussi, who has previ-

Image 3. Lussi having an angry outburst. From *Snill* (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. © Svein Nyhus.

ously been portrayed as a cute little doll, is now rendered as a threatening giant – a multi-armed monster – sprawling across the spread (image 3). This hyperbolic depiction can be understood in relation to a consistently child-centered perspective as described by Rhedin (37–64), insofar as the child's subjective experience of affect is given precedence over a more realistic representation of the situation.

In Ninny's case, one could interpret her as being therapeutically guided by Moominmamma up to her breakthrough (Taipale 19–22). Moominmamma, in turn, relies on her grandmother's old notes and recipes in order to heal Ninny. It is also she who gets the final word in the story: "Det är helt och hållet mormors förtjänst, sa mamman" ("It's all thanks to Granny, Moominmamma said"; Jansson 117/124). Lussi, however, receives no help to reclaim her face and voice. Instead, she becomes a source of help for her own great-grandmother, as well as for other silent little girls who have become so invisible that they have melted into the wallpaper:

> Men hva nå da?
> Se på veggen!
> Der kommer jammen oldemor.
> Selveste Margit Augusta Johanne!
> Var det der du var hele tiden? sier faren. (Dahle and Nyhus)

(But what's this now?
Look at the wall!
There comes, by gosh, great-grandmother.
None other than Margit Augusta Johanne!
Was that where you were all along? says the father.)

From a critical disability perspective, the great-grandmother and the other silent little girls in the wall in *Snill* can be interpreted as "more disabled" characters, commonly found in stories of children who have fallen silent (Price 214). These secondary characters become the main character's "project" in the sense that they are in need of the protagonist's help – something that, according to Price, sometimes functions as a kind of "inspiration porn" (214).

There is thus a similarity between "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill* in that both tell the story of a matrilineage, of female collective subjectivity, of women supporting other women across generations. But there is also a difference in that while Ninny is helped by the women who preceded her, Lussi is the one who must help other women. From the theoretical perspectives previously cited in this study,

Image 4. A happy Lussi eating a sausage. From *Snill* (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. © Svein Nyhus.

Lussi might be understood as the entrepreneurial subject *par excellence* (Foucault 198), in the sense that she alone must take charge of her situation and "change [her] own life" (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 188). This focus on the strong individual subject's capacity for action can be questioned from a critical disability perspective, which instead tends to foreground the enabling or constraining functions of the surrounding environment (Schalk).

If one recalls Price's observation that stories about silent children often take place during or just before puberty (210), one can also push a psychoanalytical interpretation of the girls' transformations even further. Taipale notes how Ninny, through her outburst, regains her playfulness and aggressiveness (22) – but is it not also a sexually charged act and a symbolic patricide? Ninny, after all, literally bites the patriarch Moominpappa in a kind of phallus – the tail – which makes her outburst interpretable as an expression of an emerging female sexuality. Likewise, in *Snill*, after her outburst, Lussi has gathered the courage to let her fingers slip into the "skitne hul" (dirty holes) where they previously did not belong, as the reader sees in the spread where she, with a satisfied expression, picks her nose. In the final image of Lussi, we see a broadly grinning girl with tousled hair and a thick sausage in one hand (image 4) – she is now liberated and has come into contact with her appetite, her dirtiness, and thereby also her sexuality. Turning to Žižek (104), both girls have thus also succeeded in becoming the playful and voracious subjects of pleasure for whom enjoyment is an ethical duty, which may serve as a bridge to the article's concluding discussion.

Can Ninny and Lussi Speak?

In this article, I have shown how Ninny's and Lussi's silence serve specific narrative functions that in several ways align with previous research on fiction from a critical disability studies perspective (Mitchell and Snyder 228; Price 208; Wohlmann and Rana 5). The girls' inability to meet certain normative expectations brings the stories into being, in a trajectory that moves from the trauma triggering their silence to the (productive) crisis that remedies their inabilities and makes speech possible again, thereby restoring a sense of normality within the story's framework. Along the way, we encounter characters in the role of helpers – most notably Moominmamma – but also characters who in turn require the protagonist's help, such as the "more disabled" females in *Snill* (Price 214). Both stories portray the main characters as shaped by traditional feminine ideals,

until an outburst occurs. In both Ninny's and Lussi's case, this outburst is depicted as a violent eruption directed at their surroundings. These outbursts, which at first confuse those around Ninny and Lussi, eventually become a step toward the girls' social acceptance.

In this way, one might observe that the norms regulating the girls' behavior have not entirely disappeared but rather shifted, aligning more successfully with societal expectations. This, in turn, leads to the question of how their regaining of voice can be understood from a critical disability perspective. As the stories criticize a modest and self-sacrificing gender role, they simultaneously establish a new ideal of a pleasure-seeking and self-sufficient subject. Previous studies of the stories also participate in this subjectification, in the sense that they present "Det osynliga barnet" and *Snill* as uplifting tales with happy endings. Becoming a playful and proactive girl with just the right amount of dirt in her hair thus becomes synonymous with being a "natural, realistic child" (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 183).

From a critical disability perspective, such a conclusion can be problematized. Moominmamma can be interpreted not only as Ninny's helper but also as someone who exercises a form of soft governance over her formation as a girl; someone who indeed teaches Ninny the desirable social codes, but thereby also prevents her from speaking in her own voice. Moomintroll's exclamation – "Hon är ju söt!" ("She's sweet!"; Jansson 116/123) – can thus be read as a way of hailing Ninny as a subject, which simultaneously marks her as both accepted and subdued. Interestingly, Moomintroll's characterization differs from how Ninny is described by the narrator at that moment:

> Ninni stod på bryggan med ett litet uppnäst, argt ansikte under en röd lugg. Hon fräste åt pappan som en katt. (Jansson 116/122)
>
> (She had a small, snub-nosed, angry face below a red tangle of hair. She was hissing at Moominpappa like a cat.)

Drawing on Spivak, one may ask whether someone considered subaltern in a specific context can ever make their voice heard *as* subaltern, or whether doing so is a contradiction in terms. Perhaps the privilege of speech always presupposes a conformity to a hegemonic discourse, which in practice results in a voice that may betray the experience it seeks to express. Those who are unwilling or unable to adapt to the hegemonic discourse thus face the risk of not being understood – their speech may even not be recognized as speech at all, but rather as "noise" (Rancière 30).

This perspective can shed new light on Ninny's animal-like hissing, as well as on the metaphors concerning sharp objects used to describe Lussi's outburst. In both cases, the hissing and the blow of hammers describe a form of noise – a language that cannot be easily translated and therefore must be described metaphorically. Even though Ninny and Lussi shortly thereafter become intelligible within the hegemonic discourse – Moomintroll exclaims that Ninny is "söt" (sweet); the narrator in *Snill* refers to the new, liberated Lussi as a "jenta si, det!" (good girl) – there is a brief moment in which there is no ready-made language to express what is taking place. This metaphorical hissing and hammering can thus be understood as depictions of subjectification, events situated somewhere in-between, on the border between chaos and intelligibility (Rancière 35–42).

As Alfredsson notes, it is ultimately the same expression – "Det er jenta si, det!" (She is such a good girl!) – that is used both to describe Lussi when she is submissive and after she has been liberated; the same words turn out to contain the means Lussi needs to break free (174). And indeed, one can interpret this as a progressive shift in ideals – the hegemonic discourse's understanding of what a "good girl" is has changed through Lussi's resistance. Through her way of disidentifying with a given role, a new way of making reality visible has come into effect (Rancière 35–42). But a less optimistic reading is also close at hand if one turns to Lorde's argument that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (112). Perhaps Lussi cannot truly liberate herself through the very language that once held her captive; the language of the dominant order cannot offer the girls true liberation but only render them intelligible in light of slightly updated ideals.

From this perspective, an ambiguity emerges as to whether the girls should be regarded as untamed or tamed – that is, whether their emancipation disrupts power structures or leaves them intact (Santos xiii). From the combined gender and critical disability perspective employed in this study, one might argue that the girls' hissing and hammering appear, in the eyes of their surroundings, excessively monstrous, animalistic, incomprehensible – and thereby too radical. It is only when the girls' new demeanor is softened and tempered with a touch of playful joy and suitably charming dirtiness – that is, ideals more closely aligned with contemporary notions of girlhood – that their surroundings are willing to recognize their speech as more than mere noise (Rancière 30). In this way, Ninny and Lussi do not become intelligible to those around them through their violent hissing and hammering, but rather by once again being hailed as

good girls. A happy children's book ending in which Ninny remains relentlessly fierce, or in which Lussi continues screaming wildly and acting out, is perhaps more difficult to imagine.

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Notes

1 Jansson's short story "Det osynliga barnet" was first published in 1962. In this article, I use an English translation by Thomas Warburton published in 2017. In all Jansson quotations, the first page number refers to the original publication, while the second refers to the English translation. The article uses the translated names of the Moomin characters, as these have been considered well established in an English-speaking context. When necessary, I include comments on the translation in a footnote. An English translation of *Snill* (2002) was published in 2011 under the title *What a Girl!*, in which the character Lussi was renamed Sheelu. This translation includes several additional changes to the text, intended to better suit an Indian audience (Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye 183). In this article, I have chosen to rely on the original Norwegian edition of the book and provide my own English translations of the excerpts used.

2 One might add that an important nuance is lost in this English translation. In the original text, Moomintroll exclaims, "Hon är ju söt!", which roughly translates to "She is actually pretty!". The adverb "ju" ("actually") carries significant meaning in this context, as it signals a kind of reassuring confirmation on Moomintroll's part, as if he had feared something worse.

3 My English translation of Alfredsson, who in the original writes: "samma språk, samma ord […] visar sig innehålla även de medel som Lussi behöver för att slå sig fri, och vinna tillbaka makten över sin egen kropp, och sitt eget subjektskap" (174).

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