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# Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood

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*This essay offer an extensive rehabilitation and reappraisal of the concept of childhood innocence as a means of testing the boundaries of some prevailing constructions of childhood. It excavates in detail some of the lost histories of innocence in order to show that these are more diverse and more complex than established and pejorative assessments of them conventionally suggest. Recovering, in particular, the forgotten pedigree of the Romantic account of the innocence of childhood underlines its depth and furnishes an enriched understanding of its critical role in the coming of mass education—both as a catalyst of social change and as an alternative measure of the child-centredness of the institutions of public education. Now largely and residually confined to the inheritance of nursery education, the concept of childhood innocence, and the wider Romantic project of which it is an element, can help question the assumptions underpinning modern, competence-centred philosophies of childhood.*

*There are childhood reveries which surge forth with the brilliance of a fire.*  
Gaston Bachelard (1971, p. 100)

## **I MYTHOLOGIES OF INNOCENCE**

Across a broad range of discourses, from critical theory to the literature of professional education, the concept of childhood innocence is the most regularly reviled of a constellation of ideas associated with the supposedly orthodox Western construction of childhood.<sup>1</sup> Amidst the general revision made in the last twenty years to the theory of childhood originally associated with the work of Philippe Ariès, the hostility towards the principle of childhood innocence, given definitive expression by Ariès (1962, pp. 100-119), has not only survived the process of revision but actually intensified, invigorated by the post-structuralist challenge to the key signifiers of essentialised or unitary identity.<sup>2</sup> Of all of the pioneering interpretations first proposed by Ariès, the critique of ‘innocence’

as a universal and defining property of childhood seems at first glance the most obviously valid and unassailable. Advances in the social sciences, deeper engagements with the (often frightful) lives of historically and culturally situated children and, above all, the expanding ethnographic record of varied, multiple childhoods across many societies and epochs all seem to point irresistibly to the factitious character of the concept of childhood innocence and its questionable basis in a contingent and historically-specific set of circumstances with little or no salience for the experience of children in the modern globalised world (Lancy, 2008).

The alleged redundancy of the idea of innocence is, however, only part of the opposition it continues to excite. In the rigorous application of the hermeneutic of suspicion to a cluster of inherited perceptions of childhood, innocence is censured not simply as a fraud, but also as a pernicious abstraction, damagingly implicated in the exclusion of children from the morally complex realm of the social where such absolutes can have little meaning or explanatory significance. Hence Marina Warner criticises what she memorably terms the 'manichaeon diptych' of angel and devil in which the received imagery of childhood innocence traps children, burdening them with an ideal of perfection so unsustainable that each inevitable lapse from it in the everyday lives and behaviours of young people is invariably condemned as deviant (Warner, 1994, pp. 33-48). Owain Jones attacks the promulgation of the myth of childhood innocence for its collusion with a set of cultural assumptions that differentiate children according to markers of class, environment and race. Rural, white, prosperous children have a special access to the legacy of innocence denied their poor, urban and often ethnically mixed

counterparts (Jones, 2002). It is through work of this kind that the antipathy towards childhood innocence becomes embedded in the values of professional education, in areas such as the preparation of childcare practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most antagonistic response to the traditions of childhood innocence comes currently from the movements in critical theory heir to the Foucauldian project of denaturalising the genealogies of human sexuality. Ariès' discussion of childhood innocence, with its celebrated attention to the intimate training of the infant Louis XIII and the sexual mores of the *ancien regime* French court, anticipated something of this line of analysis. Exposing the ideological processes by which normative constructions of sex and gender are authorised and regulated has since become one of the principal targets of the postmodern interrogation of the canons of Enlightenment rationality. Childhood innocence is, in this critique, a definitive and pejorative context for the reproduction of the univocal narratives of sexual destiny through which dominant patterns of gender and desire are first created and then policed. The attack on the disciplinary function of childhood innocence that arises out of these objections has taken two main forms in recent times. James Kincaid and his followers have cast a withering veil of scepticism over the literature of innocence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, locating within its alleged displacements and evasions the hypocritical concealment of predatory paedophilic longings and the stimulus to child-molestation (Kincaid, 1992; 1998; McCreery, 2004). More radically still, and with an importantly contrasting goal, the primacy accorded sexual self-fashioning in certain strains of postmodern thought, such as Queer Theory, prompts the denunciation of childhood innocence as one of the

cornerstones of the heteronormative life-schedule, supporting the patriarchal structures of compulsory heterosexuality and fixed gender determination.<sup>4</sup> Innocence is no longer simply an irrelevant historical curiosity in these readings, it is a central reference point in a wider mythology of childhood that helps uphold an unjust moral order in which both adults and children are subject to the oppressive politics of purity. Eroticised objects of an alienated adult gaze, children confined within the economy of innocence are denied full sexual and ethical agency, whilst at the same time functioning symbolically to validate a dialectic of vulnerability and corruption that constrains adult sexual autonomy. As Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson observe (2002, pp. 35-46),

The child has thus a strange identity, one that is not at one with itself, even in the act of figuring the very thing that is at one with itself.... In this way, it incorporates into itself the dialectic it is called upon to forestall. So it is in its absolute singularity that it is read as the most stable, the most fixed, the unquestioned and unquestionable—universally. In short, it is without question.

Contemporary scholarly opposition to the concept of the innocence of childhood serves several distinct polemical purposes. They each share, however, the broadly Arièsian understanding of the origin of the myth of innocence and trace the ideological pedigree of the concept almost without exception to the same historical conjuncture. This is vital to an understanding of the widespread indictment of innocence in the literature of childhood studies, its unanimity perhaps jarring ironically with a disciplinary ethic that elsewhere proclaims the virtues of alterity and the eschewal of closed explanatory systems. Higonnet (1998, p. 8) sums up an academic consensus that has solidified in the literature into an overarching orthodoxy:

Historians date the modern, western concept of an ideally innocent childhood to somewhere around the seventeenth century. Until then, children had been understood as faulty small adults, in need of correction and discipline, especially Christian children who were thought to be born in sin.

Interestingly, the imprecise reference to the ‘seventeenth century’ starting-point, which is vaguely indebted to Ariès’ chronology, is rarely followed through in these statements of a supposedly self-evident historical truth. The conventional historiography of innocence almost always leaps from gesturing tokenistically to a presumed but barely acknowledged seventeenth century bench-mark on to Rousseau or some other foundational moment of the Romantic movement. For it is, of course, with Romanticism that the trouble with innocence really begins (Haudrup, 2000, pp. 39-59). The zealous rejection of one myth—the conceit of childhood innocence—is matched by the convenient embrace of another: the myth of origins, which strives to assign the emergence of innocence to a specific and decisive turning point in early modern European culture’s perception of the child.

The allusion to a vaguely realised pre-Romantic backdrop to the rise of innocence has a potential to open up lines of enquiry into the area that few commentators have pursued.<sup>5</sup> Probing the late Renaissance interest in the transcendentalism of childhood not only converges with new post-Ariès assessments of the emergence of the modern institutions of childhood (Somerville, 1992; Classen, 2005; Cunningham, 2006), it also holds forth the prospect of reconnecting critical awareness with a wider and more ancient historical grammar of innocence embracing the cultural work of a range of discursive genres, including theology, philosophy, mysticism and poetics. This task, it can be seen, furthers the genealogical endeavour by problematising an accepted critical dogma and excavating the hidden history of the elusive idea of innocence in order more effectively to comprehend its sources and evaluate its continuing influence. The general resistance to such a move within the broad critique of innocence may reflect the impact of prevailing

disciplinary specialisations. It might also point, however, to an implicit recognition that the current academic consensus on the concept performs a pivotal—even necessary—function in the wider critical appraisal of childhood in contemporary culture and society (Masschelein, 2003; Ryan, 2008).

## II HISTORIES OF INNOCENCE

Insistence on a High Romantic turning point in the fortunes of childhood innocence rests upon a view of preceding values that oversimplifies the legacy of the deep past while subduing those elements within it that complicate the contrived contrast of perceptions before and after the decisive Romantic intervention. In a more nuanced historiography of innocence, the Romantic account of childhood can be seen to participate in a rich and variegated movement of feeling with roots running far back into the religious, philosophical and aesthetic traditions of Western culture. Acknowledging this truth does not erase the memory—or the inheritance—of the pessimistic moral and theological systems, derived chiefly from the Augustinian fall-redemption paradigm and its Calvinist variants, in which childhood was also systematically configured in the late medieval and early modern periods (Somerville, 1982; Stables, 2008, pp. 51-56). It is precisely from the logic of such antitheses that a more generous account of the lineage of childhood innocence is seeking to escape. It may nevertheless be significant that much contemporary theorising about childhood echoes the fatalistic, querulous tone of some of the bleakest of the early modern Christian commentators. That a pre-Romantic Christian emphasis upon the depravity of childhood existed, interdependent with a widespread

punitive regime of adult control and surveillance of children in church, home and school, is not in dispute (Thomas, 1990; Orme, 2006, pp. 128-163). It requires to be set alongside, however, another tradition of thought with equally profound investments in Judaeo-Christian scripture and doctrine—including largely forgotten but influential movements of speculative Christian mysticism in which the image of the child played a commanding role.

Contrary to the findings of Ariès, there existed in the Middle Ages a large corpus of Christian writings devoted to descriptions of the innocence of childhood and the uniqueness of children's experience. The twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen compared the goodness of children to the brightness of the angels (1986, p. 299). Dante could write that "...In little children only mayst thou seek/True innocence and faith..."; (1962, p. 229). Latin lexicographers wrongly traced the etymology of *puer*, a boy, and *puella*, a girl, to *puritas*, meaning 'pure'; and one divine could write 'Children are as pure as heaven.' (Shahar, 1990, 17-20; Schultz, 1995; Orme, 2001, pp. 188-189). The formulation most readily associated with Rousseau, that 'There is no original perversity in the human heart. There is not a single vice about which one cannot say how and whence it entered...' (1979, p. 56), has powerful affinities with elements of the English Puritan and Rhineland inner light movements of the centuries that preceded Rousseau and by the Continental variants of which he was clearly influenced. It is the dissenting tracts and Puritan psychobiography of seventeenth century writers, such as the Digger Gerrard Winstanley, which, in the English tradition especially, form the crucible in which the modern conception of childhood innocence finds its most defiant assertion: '...a childe that is new borne, or till he grows up to some few yeares...is innocent, harmeless...And



this is *Adam*, or mankinde in his Innocency.’ (Sabine, 1941, pp. 494-495). The image of the child as representative of a prelapsarian perfection and unity of being is a perennial metaphor in the literature of religious mysticism, alchemy and the esoteric tradition.

Recent scholarship into the prehistory of Romanticism has shown that the teachings of the Protestant inner light sects made an immense contribution to the development of psychological interiority in European thought and writing (Berlin, 1993; Beiser, 2003), including the preservation and consolidation of the tradition of childhood innocence in a period of religious confrontation and cultural crisis. In the European context especially, belief in the fundamental innocence of childhood—understood, it ought to be emphasized, as a *type* of the radical innocence of general humanity—can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the dominant cultural hegemony of the contending fall-redemption theologies of Protestant Predestinarians and Counter-Reformation Jansenists. To espouse an alternative, subterranean tradition, conveyed from antiquity through Christian Neoplatonism and its multiple philosophical progeny, became the signature of a particular style of European spiritual dissenter, cutting across confessional divides (Marcus, 1978). Jeremy Taylor typifies, in the turbulent English setting of the 1640s and 50s, the Anglo-Catholic protest against the Calvinist emphasis on the polluted origins of the unregenerate human infant, mired in the concupiscence of Original Sin. For thinkers like Taylor, the innovative Puritan attention to childhood and domesticity was an undoubted stimulus for renewed psychological interest in, and moral solicitude towards, the young. It also, however, repeatedly pathologised children and reinforced a repellent

ontology of generational separateness based upon its characteristically despondent disciplines of introspection:

But it is hard upon such mean accounts to reckon all children to be born enemies of God...full of sin and vile corruption when the Holy Scriptures propound children as imitable for their pretty innocence and sweetness, and declare them rather heirs of heaven than hell....These are better words than are usually given them; and signify, that they are beloved of God, not hated, designed for heaven and born to it...not born for hell: that was 'prepared for the devil and his angels' not for innocent babes. This does not call them naturally wicked, but rather naturally innocent, and is a better account than is commonly given them by imputation of Adam's sin (Taylor, 1665, pp. 164-165).

Thirty years previously, John Earle, the Bishop of Salisbury, in his hugely popular collection of 'characters', *Microcosmographie* of 1628, extended the *theological* defence of the innate innocence of childhood by interpreting it as a recapitulation of the originary innocence of the Garden of Eden:

A *Child* is a Man in small letter, yet the best Copie of *Adam* before he tasted of *Eve*, or the Apple...His father hath writ him as his owne little story, wherein he reads those dayes that he cannot remember; and sighes to see what innocence he hath out-liu'd...(Earle, 1899, p. 185).

The references by Winstanley and Earle to parallels between the innocence of childhood and the prelapsarian condition of the first human beings is a poorly understood element in the symbolic pattern of innocence in Christian thought. In the divided England of the middle of the seventeenth century, the theme was taken up by a generation of Anglican clergymen-poets, at odds with the prevailing theological and political temper of their time and place, yet of vital importance in the transmission of key features of a suppressed Christian tradition, included in which were a set of core beliefs about the

spiritual cache surrounding the image of the child (Martin, 1938). To the evangelical imagination, the translation of this vein of thought to the plane of inner, psychological experience made the child described by those writers into an emblem of privileged sensitivity and freshness of sensation—the ultimate icon of wholeness, integration and the transformation of the imperfection of the world into the possibilities of new life:

Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child...All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare, and delightful and beautiful. My knowledge was divine...I seemed as one brought into the estate of innocence...Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing were moving jewels...  
(Traherne, 1990, p. 226).

This is Thomas Traherne writing in 1668, almost a century and a half before Blake and Wordsworth. Traherne declares that, as a child, ‘...I felt a vigour in my sense/That was all spirit...I nothing in the world did know/But ‘twas divine.’ (p. 5). Many currents of thought are clearly evident in utterances of this kind, but the consistency and the coherence of the underlying complex of ideas are irreducible, and form an indispensable foundation for much subsequent understanding of the quickened awareness, and the spiritual and moral sensibility, of the child. Viewed—when considered at all—as a local aberration, Traherne in fact typifies a powerful, if deliberately marginalised, vector in English piety of the period.

An interesting locus of the wider movement of feeling from which this inclination emerges can be seen in the writings of Traherne’s older contemporaries, the twin brothers Thomas and Henry Vaughan. The general tenor of Thomas Vaughan’s abstruse,

alchemical speculations shares the attitudes of those late Renaissance mystics for whom the child is a central representation of both continuity and renewal: ‘This *Consideration* of my self when I was a Child, hath made me since examine Children...A Child I suppose, *in puris Naturalibus*, before education alters and ferments him...Notwithstanding, I should think, by what I have read, that the naturall disposition of Children...is one of those things, about which the *Antient Philosophers* have busied themselves even to some curiosity.’ (Vaughan, 1990, p. 521). Thomas Vaughan here shows the influence of a number of Continental thinkers, principally Weigel, Gorlitz, and the great German mystic Jacob Boehme, whose works were much translated into English in the second half of the seventeenth century. Boehme’s principal concern is to defend early childhood as the naturalistic expression of an essential unity of being upon which the sovereignty of the mature, integrated self depends. It is a view with affinities to Platonism, but distinguished by a belief—which foreshadows Wordsworth—in the uniqueness of the psychological chemistry through which infants, especially, construct a pre-rational picture of the world. This is a condition, Boehme insists (mischievously inverting a familiar educational metaphor), from which adults, in proximity to infants, can continue to be enriched: ‘Little Children are our Schoolmasters...they bring their sport from their Mothers wombe, which is a Remnant of Paradise.’ (1647, p. 130). By ‘sport’, Boehme means ‘play’, and his delight in children’s instinctive and spontaneous inclination to play represents one of the first reflections upon the link between innocence and play in the veneration of childhood. In another typical inversion of what had by then become a clichéd simile in popular devotional writing, the Philosopher in Boehme’s *Aurora* of 1656 poses the question ‘To Whom now shall I liken the Angles?’ He provides

his own answer: ‘I will liken them to *little* children, which walk in the fields in *May*, among the *flowers*, and pluck them, and make curious Garlands, and Poseys, carrying them in their hands rejoicing.’ (Boehme, 1656, p. 321).

Thomas Vaughan’s brother, the poet-priest Henry Vaughan, advances a still more personalised and visionary rendering of these beliefs, dwelling upon the redemptive possibilities of capturing the child’s ‘...age of mysteries! which he/Must live twice that would God’s face see,’ and ‘by mere playing go to Heaven.’ For Henry Vaughan, ‘the white designs that children drive’ (‘Child-hood’: 1983, p. 288) include an innate perception of the pristine integrity of the created order, with the sanctity of which the child has profound spiritual affinities:

Happy those early days when I  
 Shined in my angel-infancy  
 Before I understood this place  
 Appointed for my second race,  
 Or taught my soull to fancy aught  
 But a white celestial thought...  
 (‘The Retreat’, p. 172)

At the heart of this view of the child lies the evolving modern belief in the continuity of the self though time, and it is from this point that increasing emphasis is placed upon the connection between healthy early childhood experience and the moral and psycho-spiritual well-being of the adult individual. These ideas are of course central to the educational philosophies of late Renaissance thinkers such as Locke and Comenius (Singer 2005). Ever since the affinities between Henry Vaughan and Wordsworth were first identified by Bishop Trench in 1868—focused mainly upon the striking similarities between Vaughan’s poem ‘The Retreat’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations Ode’—the

preoccupation with innocence in the writings of Vaughan and his contemporaries has been interpreted proleptically and recruited to a teleology that privileges rather than analyzes the seeming originality of the Romantic transformation of perceptions of childhood.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is a compelling justification, given the climate of enquiry in which Vaughan's outlook was formed, to look backwards in time rather than forwards, to probe more deeply into the historical genealogy of this version of innocence, grappling with the still earlier sources upon which Vaughan and his contemporaries quite expressly drew.

Traherne, the Vaughan brothers, and the broader range of Anglican writers such as Herrick and Herbert who participated in the anti-Calvinist defence of childhood, belonged to a wider coalition in latitudinarian Protestant thought in the Europe of the later Reformation. They looked to a recovery of the wisdom of the early Church Fathers and of pre-Nicene patristics as a means of combating the morbidity of extreme Calvinism whilst avoiding the errors of Rome (Walker, 1964, p. 11). This was a quest that incurred the wrath of Calvin and his followers, who accused their opponents of Pelagianism and Arianism and of denying the gravity of Original Sin. In their revolt against what they saw as the fatalism of the Calvinist doctrines of depravity and atonement, the Anglican school, centred on the Cambridge Platonists, drew deliberately upon the writings of the second century Church Fathers Irenaeus of Lyons (c125-202) and Origen (c185-254) as a means of refuting propositions they had come to regard as the consequences of a perverse Calvinist interpretation of Augustine. The seventeenth century passion for the writings of Irenaeus, in particular, fed directly into the work of the Cambridge Platonists and through them exercised an immense influence on Traherne and the Vaughan brothers (Grant,

1971). One of the main sites of contention in this struggle, signalled implicitly in the repeated invocations of the figure of Adam in the literature cited above, was the early chapters of the Book of Genesis and, especially, the disputed interpretation of the character of the prelapsarian condition enjoyed by Adam and Eve. It seems clear that in his reflections upon of the Pauline account of the Fall and the symbolism of the relationship between God and the primal humans, Irenaeus of Lyons had come to consider Adam and Eve to be, at least metaphorically, *children*:

Adam and Eve . . . ‘were naked and were not ashamed,’ for there was in them an innocent and infantile mind, and they thought or understood nothing whatsoever of those things that are wickedly born in the soul through lust and shameful desires. For at that time they preserved their nature intact, since that which was breathed into the handiwork was the breath of life; and while the breath remains in its order and strength, it is without comprehension or understanding of what is evil.<sup>7</sup>

At the heart of Irenaeus’ soteriology is the story of God’s paternal care for the infants in the Garden. The complication of the ontological freedom accorded the first humans is that they are by necessity placed by their Creator in a condition of endless becoming—even, self-fashioning—which leaves their ‘discretion still underdeveloped’ and their free wills prey to ‘the deceiver’. For Adam ‘was a child and had need to grow so as to come to his full perfection.’ (Irenaeus, 1952, pp. 12, 14). The key biblical doctrine underpinning Irenaeus’ unflinchingly orthodox yet ultimately optimistic view of the Fall is the Genesis statement that humanity is made, first and foremost, in the *image* of God. As Marshall and Parvis have proposed, the distinctive character of this emphasis on the concept of the *imago dei* resides in its materiality: matter and flesh are good and whole. The corporeal embodiment of the individual infant signifies the integrity of ‘something bodily and physical in which all human beings share.’ It is, they argue, ‘not

lost at the Fall but rather remains as a locus of God's saving power in the world...It is inclusive, it sees things from the side of the most vulnerable, and it points ahead.' (2004, p. 324). The innocence of childhood is, for Irenaeus and the Renaissance poetic theologies shaped by his rediscovery, not static, but dynamic and developmental. It is an image of absolute dependence and absolute potential. In the prosecution of these arguments, Irenaeus typifies an important yet often overlooked strain in early Christian theodicy, with roots in the highly pro-juvenile language of the New Testament. Here the fundamental dignity of the person of the child is shown to derive not from the exercise of reason or moral capability (about the validity of each, in a child, there might legitimately be doubt), but from the mere fact of being: the possession of a body, and a body viewed as a reiteration of the innocence and vulnerability of the divine child laid in the manger. The essentially incarnational quality of patristic thinking on these questions, taken up in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (c150-215), Tertullian (c160-220) and Cyprian (c208-258), defied the norms of pagan antiquity in proposing the innocence of childhood as a blueprint and inspiration for the Christian life. This innocence is, moreover, not simply nostalgia for the apparent absence of sin in the prologue to lived, rational experience. It is a set of positive values attached to the state of childhood, centred upon children's physical presence, their spontaneity, their predispositions, their appetites, their capacity for play and their relationship with their parents—of which Clement, in particular, has a markedly optimistic view (Bakke, 2006, pp. 58-72). Commenting on the implications of this neglected cluster of New Testament and patristic convictions, the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1991, pp. 11-12) has noted that through it,

the ways of the child, long since sealed off for the adult, open up an original dimension in which everything unfolds within the bounds of the right, the true, the good, in a zone of hidden containment which cannot be derogated as



‘pre-ethical’ or ‘unconscious,’ as if the spirit of the child had not yet awakened, or was still at the animal level—something it never was, not even in the mother’s womb. That zone or dimension in which the child lives, on the contrary, reveals itself as a sphere of original wholeness and health....

Von Balthasar’s bold additional claim that ‘...everywhere outside of Christianity the child is automatically sacrificed’ (1968, p. 257), underlines (with a grim and unwitting irony, perhaps, given the recent record of some of the ministers of his Church) the contrast between the early Christian valorisation of the child and the often destructive classical asymmetry of adult and child out of which the calamitous practices of infanticide and pederasty were sanctioned in the ancient world. The Christian opposition to such social practices was a frequent source of controversy in the Roman Empire and laid an important foundation for the development of the Christian understanding of childhood generally and the innocence of childhood in particular (Gundry-Volf, 2001).

### **III INNOCECE RECLAIMED**

The reclamation of these enduring ideas in certain areas of Reformation theology—largely in response to the internecine crisis of Calvinism—can be shown to be a far more significant aspect of the history of innocence than is commonly acknowledged. As appreciation increases of the extent to which core Romantic principles germinated in the milieu of dissenting Protestant spiritualities, represented by key transitional figures such as Hamann and Swedenborg, so the persistence of the subversive legacy of innocence assumes a subtly altered place in the intellectual ancestry of Romanticism (Balfour, 2002). Indeed, John Mee has gone so far as to claim that English High Romanticism is at its core a mutation of the Reformation virtue of ‘enthusiasm’, with everything this entails for the social control of the disruptive spiritual and libidinous energies of childhood

(Mee, 2003). Recognising the indebtedness of writers such as Blake and Wordsworth to the legacy of dissenting thought refurbishes understanding of their strategic application of the concept of innocence to the prophetic project of redeeming childhood from the dominant functional, performative and disciplinary discourses of early industrial society. In keeping with the prevailing critical scepticism towards innocence, the direction of contemporary Romantic theory is strongly inclined against this claim, dwelling instead upon the centrality of innocence to a wider, sinister cultural programme of containment and self-regulation in which Romantic notions of an ideal childhood are discursively located (Plotz, 2001, pp. 56-60). Even seemingly progressive social endeavours—most especially modern, child-centred education—allied to the Romantic vision of childhood as a state inherently innocent, free and sometimes even ecstatically captivated by the wonder of a prodigal world, survive little of the withering accusatory glare of post-Romantic ideological suspicion. Every cultural undertaking involving the idealised image of the child is, in this critical scrutiny, always from its inception fatally haunted by the contradictions of the Romantic inheritance, prey to its displacements and suppressions of everything in actual childhood that is not compliant with the normative overarching ideal (Bunyard 2010).

Powerful though this critique can often be, and prudent though it is to treat the transcendental claims of Romantic argument with caution, wholesale repudiation of the Romantic defence of childhood involves a denial of the sophistication with which Romantic art confronts the paradoxes and crises of childhood innocence in a perilous and volatile world. As Roni Natov has shown, William Blake's famous affirmation of the

condition of innocence exuberantly celebrates the fundamental *plasticity* of early childhood, its capacity to respond to experiences of conflict and stress just as readily as it embraces those vouchsafing attachment and fulfillment (Natov, 2003, pp. 9-21). The dialectic of Innocence and Experience is acted out in both the psyche of the child and in the disfigured cultural order of which he or she is a part. As well as ratifying the child's vital access to an atavistic unity of being, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* repeatedly confront the child's primal fear of abandonment and represent it poetically and visually as an anxiety overcome only after great struggle. The Chimney Sweeper, the Little Girl Lost, the Little Boy Lost—all the various child-protagonists of Blake's songs—endure the impact of a ruthless adult society in which childhood is tyrannised by overlapping forces of economic, racial and religious subordination. The innocence embodied in these compelling personalities is elevated to a form of *resistance* by its moral intelligence and its access to resources of the imagination that reproach the brutality and hypocrisy of the zone in which childhood finds itself repeatedly confined:

They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy, & dance & sing,  
They think they have done me no injury:  
And are gone to praise God & his Priest and King  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.  
(‘The Chimney Sweeper’, Blake, 1988, p.22)

The endurance and transformative power Blake associates with innocence is forged out of its engagement with, and not its flight from, the oppressive delusions of experience and its diminished version of human purpose. Radical innocence overcomes these limitations not by recourse to an unsatisfactory transcendentalism, but by the assertion of authentic and humanising ideals consistent with the propensities and appetites of childhood itself.

Freedom of movement, familial belonging, natural compassion, desire (including, daringly, sexual desire), resilience, and continuity with the ecology of other living things represent, in Blake's poetry of childhood, properties that are *constitutive* of innocence, affording eventual access to a higher synthesis in which the 'contrary states' of Innocence and Experience are transformed. The child, for Blake, is a source of human feeling that opposes limits, particularly those limits associated with the patriarchal power of the despotic father God and his secular successors in the rationalist systems of production and authority governing the institutions of early industrial society. The innocent child is not an escape from these systems, nor is she even simply a victim. Rather, she is—as she was for Blake's dissenting forebears—a dangerous memory, both individual and collective, of a different way of thinking about human destiny.

The Romantic enunciation of innocence is not exhausted by Blakean dialectics. It has many subtle inflections, covering the spectrum from the vatic exaltation of childhood to a conciliatory ceremonial naturalism healing the division between adult and child within highly specified hierarchies of social relation. The children who populate Wordsworth's poems, such as 'We Are Seven' or 'Anecdote for Fathers', once again refuse an easy or complacent staging of this reconciliation of the generations, emphasising instead the evasive and refractory quality of the adult-child encounter and its ironically contrasting styles of reasoning:

Oh dearest, dearest Boy! My heart  
 For better lore could seldom yearn  
 Could I but teach the hundredth part  
 Of what from thee I learn.  
 ('Anecdote for Fathers', Wordsworth, 1992, pp.132-134).

Wordsworth has been rightly praised for ‘giving voice’ to children, if also, more recently, admonished for his frequent neglect of the real children in his care. Plotz is surely wrong, however, in her suggestion that the concept of childhood innocence barely interested him (2001, 55-58). Facile, sentimental definitions of innocence certainly bored Wordsworth, as they did Blake. Nevertheless, Wordsworth’s efforts to extend conversational voice to marginal and isolated figures were clearly founded upon the recognition he wished to confer on the ‘state of greater simplicity’ defended in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and in his time conventionally dismissed by high art (Wordsworth, 1992, p. 60; Marcus, 1985). Indeed, it is the dialogic quality of Wordsworth’s poetry of engagement that allows him in narrative poems such as ‘The Idiot Boy’ and ‘Michael’ to adjudicate between different versions of innocence across a range of personalities and landscapes within the poems, including those of mature adult protagonists emotionally bonded with children and alive to the uniqueness of their response to experience. The outcome of such an encounter with innocence is, for the adult, most certainly gain and not loss. Indeed, it may be by virtue of a parallel synergy of hopes and interests across the generations that, as Barbara Garlitz has so ably demonstrated, Wordsworth’s most ecstatic articulation of the innocent sublimity of childhood, the ‘Immortality Ode’, assumed almost scriptural levels of cultural authority in egalitarian educational circles in nineteenth century Britain (Garlitz, 1966; Halpin, 2008). Surfacing in diary entries, letters, essays, sermons, manifestos and political speeches, the rhetoric of the ‘Immortality Ode’ was powerfully and deliberately harnessed to radical demands for the extension of mass education and early claims for the recognition of children’s rights. Two important correctives to the standard critique of the

language of innocence emerge from this. First, the frequently suspect transcendentalism of the concept of innocence is seen to possess an unexpectedly progressive political traction. Secondly, the ‘democratisation’ of innocence in its passage from elite to popular culture, and in its potent enrichment of the discourses of educational access, underscores a vital if often obscured principle at the heart of the Wordsworthian defence of the innocence of childhood *tout court*—that is, that innocence is an *entitlement* of childhood as well as a *privilege* of it (Dunne, 2008).

#### **IV INNOCENCE, EXPERIENCE, COMPETENCE**

The organic, abiding view of childhood innocence as a mobilising virtue in the creation and revival of a more general adult vitality contests many of the critical orthodoxies of contemporary critical theory, education and psychology (Saward, 1999). It is certainly highly significant that the perceived Romantic recovery of the radical innocence of childhood in the period from approximately 1750-1830 paralleled the rise of industrial-bureaucratic state and its emblematic institutions of disciplinary regulation and standardisation. Foremost among these lay the gradual extension of mass elementary schooling to the general population, characterised by its patterns of classroom aggregation and simultaneous instruction modelled on the early factory system (Hamilton, 1989, pp. 97-120). Orthodox histories of popular education, anchored in a dominant humanistic narrative of enlightened educational progress, inclined until comparatively recently to identify this movement, even in its obvious myriad imperfections, with the steady realisation of the ideals of key Enlightenment activists such as Comenius, Locke and Helvétius and their advocacy of popular schooling as

remedy for the ignorance, oppression and sectarianism of previous eras. This version of the history of education is not by itself false, but it is incomplete, especially in its understanding of the cultural and ideological influences through which mass education was resourced and implemented from the early industrial period onwards.

Even if Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian critiques of the role of popular schooling in the covert reproduction of docile subjectivities is in the final analysis to be challenged for its fatalism, the seemingly benign practices of interactive learning and teaching in the institutions of progressive education in the late Enlightenment period have nevertheless been implicated in the governance of children's minds and bodies in forms of lasting and subtle significance to modern societies. The advent of mass education—including, indeed, those versions openly declared to be emancipatory and inclusive—has been firmly embedded in the expansion of the complex legal, political, economic and cultural apparatus of the modern state and its increasingly searching demands on, and promises to, its 'citizens'. This explains why in both Europe (Gill, 2010, pp. 229-255) and the United States (Brewer, 2005, pp. 129-150) arguments raged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries over the proper supervision of mass education and its relationship to political participation and state power. Even the champions of a radically 'democratised' concept of public education, such as Noah Webster or Mary Wollstonecraft, explicitly defended the role of the school in the nurture of a thoroughgoing social and political literacy which would 'claim' children for reason and republican virtue, if necessary by wresting them away from all other rival or regressive loyalties, including those of family and sect. Contemporary manifestations of education

for citizenship, and the confident, applied rationality of P4C, may believe they have overcome or even abolished this tension, but the spectre of ‘regulated childhoods’ remains palpable in the ways in which discursive boundaries are set and emotional and investments moderated across these activities.

Of course the educational zone that stood historically in many respects outside this structure of increasing surveillance and regulation proved to be the site most hospitable to the discourse of Romantic innocence and its attendant pedagogical values. Both in theory and practice, infant or kindergarten education in Europe and America developed through its leading early nineteenth century exponents such as Pestalozzi and Froebel a defining philosophy of learning destined to form the core of progressive, child-centred education as the industrial era unfolded (Davis, 2010). It is in fact difficult to overstate the extent to which the ethics of infant education through most of the nineteenth century reproduced the Romantic rhetoric of childhood innocence as both a general theory of childhood and a convincing rationale for early learning. Indeed, it is only the subsequent steady encroachment of more obviously performative constructions of effective nursery education that has obscured this history, colluding in the annexation of the pre-5 environment by the competence-driven objectives of the primary or elementary classroom. Any suggestion that the rich, Romantic language of childhood innocence represents only a decadent, even disquieting, imposition on the lives of real children is rebutted in the recognition of the combative force it has assumed (and in some sense retains) in the defence of early childhood from the encroachments of instrumentalised conceptions of education—even those beguilingly tricked out in the garments of



empowerment and participation. Against these pressures and inducements, the traditions of innocence understood in their full complexity propose a startlingly fresh vision of the child—a child who is endowed, Adam Phillips (1998, pp. 21-22) suggests,

...with an astonishing capacity for pleasure and, indeed, the pleasures of interest; with an unwilling relish of sensuous experience which often unsettles the adults who like to call it affection. This child who can be deranged by hope and anticipation—by an ice-cream—seems to have a passionate love of life, a curiosity about life, that for some reason isn't always easy to sustain...Because it is easy to sentimentalize and to idealize, the visionary qualities of the child, this part of the legacy of romanticism—which is in Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge most explicitly—has been abrogated by psychoanalysis.

Phillips' wry yet penetrating commentary artfully positions psychoanalysis rather than philosophy as the unsuspecting heir to this aspect of Romanticism, at least with respect to its place in the histories of innocence. Psychoanalysis inherits, perhaps without wishing to, the imagery of childhood laid down in the palimpsest of pagan, Christian and Romantic speculation with which this essay has been concerned. But this is an imagery that surely cannot be contained within the therapeutic parameters of the psychoanalytic project, even at its most compensatory. Always, the tradition of which innocence is such a potent expression pushes against these constraints, its inner dynamic urging a return that is also a renovation; its impulse utopian rather than arcadian in the future educational possibilities towards which it points.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The range of literature in which this view is expressed is too vast to record exhaustively. In the sociology of childhood see, most recently, Shanahan (2004), Wyness (2006, pp. 11-26), Meyer (2007), Jones (2009, pp. 108-117). See also James (1998, pp. 12-20). In the literature of child protection, an important statement is Kitzinger (1990). In Cultural Studies, see Jenkins (1998). In the visual arts the key text remains Higonnet (1998); see also Langmuir (2006, pp. 33-67). In literary studies, see Zornado (2001, pp. 101-135). In the philosophy of education, Baker (2001, pp. 300-323). The view persists in historical studies as well: see Gillis (2002) and Levander (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Important rebuttals of Ariès may be found in Wilson (1980) and Pollock (1984, pp. 1-28). See also Heywood (2010).

<sup>3</sup> The claim of early years education researcher, Reesa Sorin (2003), that ‘Coming from an early childhood teaching background...it is often difficult to shift from the view of the child as innocent...Early childhood pedagogy has for many years been based on the image of the child as innocent and in need of adult direction...’ is typical here. See also Kehily and Montgomery (2003, pp. 221-266). An attempt at formulating a viable understanding of ‘proper pleasure’ in early years settings in particular is advanced by Jones (2003).

<sup>4</sup> See the highly controversial book by Levine (2002), the collection of Bruhm and Hurley (2004), and Pugh (2011). See also Robinson (2008).

<sup>5</sup> A notable yet tantalizing exception is Richardson (1999). Richardson alludes to the revival by Wordsworth and some of his contemporaries of ‘obscure seventeenth-century Anglican writers such as Vaughan and Earle.’ (25).

<sup>6</sup> See Zimmer (2002, pp. 30-65) and McMaster (1935).

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Epideixis*, 14. Cited and translated by Steenberg (2004). See also Harrison (1992).

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