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# **Singing ‘A Tune Beyond Ourselves’**

## **An Investigation into the Diverse Voices of Childhood and Poetry**

A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

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at

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by

**Caroline J. Masters**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## Abstract

Over the past 300 years the ‘World of Children’ has evolved and along with it so has poetry written for, and about, children. This thesis focuses on the poetic portrayal of children in Great Britain from 1715 to 1885, specifically the virtues which adults have deemed necessary, ‘desirable, attractive, or interesting in the young’.<sup>1</sup> The poets I discuss — Isaac Watts, William Blake, Charles and Mary Lamb, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, William Wordsworth, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Robert Louis Stevenson— either view children as little adults, adults in training, or rebel against adult interference in children’s lives. All of the poets strive to protect and advance a particular concept of childhood.

The recent scholarship of critics such as Nancy Taylor Coghill, Norejane J. Henrickson, and Mitzi Myers has shown that as the canon of children’s literature has evolved, a progression away from didacticism towards imagination and ‘fun’ is apparent, with the latter being preferred. This thesis explores whether the apparent division of poetry for, and about, children is as clear cut as this.

Throughout, I argue that the history of childhood and poetry is variegated and that creativity has not ousted didacticism over time. Instead the two currents have at times co-existed, been merged, or blended with other approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Avery, ‘Children’s Books and Social History’, in *Research About Nineteenth-Century Children and Books. Portrait Studies*, ed. by Selma K. Richardson, Selma K (Illinois: Illinois University, 1980), 23-40 (p. 23).

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This thesis is dedicated to Mrs Pickett, a lady who understood that poetry is a risky business. It is also dedicated to my father who taught me that reading is an adventure. Jack, my 'beamish boy', this writing is also for you. Your animated appreciation of *The Jabberwocky* and passionate enthusiasm for nonsense makes me so happy! May *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Jumblies* continue to bring you loads more adventure and laughs.

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## Preface

Thinking back to primary school, one memory stands out. On the mat of Mrs Pickett's standard three classroom, we patiently await the opening of her illustrated copy of *The Highwayman*. She began:

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,  
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,  
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,  
And the highwayman came riding—  
Riding—riding—  
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.<sup>1</sup>

Our rowdy class went quiet. Mrs Pickett's dramatic reading had surprised us, capturing our imaginations and attention. When we begged her to display the entire poem, she set about creating a frieze which spanned the entire classroom. In the following weeks we papered the walls with our artwork, each piece reflecting the mood of a stanza. Poetry was now the target of our acclaimed rowdiness and enthusiasm. Mrs Pickett offered us new poems, all set within equally adventurous lessons, encouraging us to view writing in a different light. It was no longer about the endless handwriting practise and the militant enforcement of spelling and grammar rules.

As a teacher, I often think back to Mrs Pickett's lessons. I have read *The Highwayman* and many other great poems to my classes and I have been moved by their responses. It appears that children cannot get enough of good poetry, just

as long as it ticks a few certain boxes. My own class put poetry to the test. This is their story.

It is reading time in Room Nineteen. Enthusiastic collections of seven and eight year olds sift through two boxes in the cushion strewn reading corner. Books in hand, they dash off to claim prime reading ground. The library area, now littered with discarded books, contains two boxes; one green and one blue. The green box is full of books. The blue box is almost empty.

The previous week a colleague of mine, who I shared a class with, emerged from Maungawhau School's abundant resource room carrying a green box of poetry. The box featured a selection of light and humorous verse targeted towards our class' reading ages and interests. She asked if I could recommend anything from my personal stash of poems. Upon leaving work I grabbed an empty blue box, pondering the possibilities as I drove home. Later, as I rifled through my bookcase, I became more and more excited as I rediscovered personal favourites. After rereading Wallace Stevens' 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' I decided that my blue box, like Steven's blue guitar, would serve as a symbol of the imagination:

The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar.'<sup>2</sup>

Like Stevens, and his fellow Modernists, I wanted things to be 'made new' by poetry. I wanted to show the class that the poetic imagination has the ability to transform reality with astonishing and exquisite precision.

As I flicked through my books, certain children sprung to mind and the blue box was soon overflowing. I wound up with a jumbled collection that I hoped would appeal to our quirky and creative class. The blue box poems were not levelled according to the children's reading ability and the majority were not even written with children in mind. Very few works rhymed but instead they were packed with great poetic devices and innovative use of language. I included several copies of 'Budapest', 'Introduction to Poetry' and 'Invention' by Billy Collins. There was a truncated version of 'The Storm' by Theodore Roethke and a shortened version of T.S Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. There were a few haiku by Frank O'Hara, a couple of short poems by Charles Bukowski, selections of works by Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound and a large range of Imagist poetry by William Carlos Williams and Amy Lowell. In the end my blue box only held a very small amount of 'children's' poetry. It contained 'The Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll and a smattering of limericks by Edward Lear. Mostly, the box was packed full of poetry written for adults.

It occurred to me that I was taking a bit of a risk. Would these poems prove too hard for the average seven year old? Maybe, but I think that poetry, like

any creative art, is a potentially risky business. Thinking of Mrs Pickett, I wanted to give the class quality poetry and so I decided to trial my “risky” collection.

I thought Room Nineteen would be up for the challenge. The children had already encountered similar works a few times in our Friday poetry lessons. During these lessons, a group of children became intrigued by Imagism, most notably an anxious and shy little boy with dyslexia. Reading and writing was a constant, unhappy and overwhelming struggle for him. However, Imagist poetry provided him with a ‘way in’ to language. I was absolutely thrilled each time I saw him rummaging through the blue box.

After noting his, and his classmates’, interest in the blue box, I held up the two containers and asked Room Nineteen, ‘Which box of poetry do you prefer?’

The entire class pointed to the blue box. I was secretly glad; they were my favourites too.

‘What do you like about the blue box poetry?’ I asked them.

Zoe raised her hand, ‘Well the stuff in the green box is cool. It is kinda like a catchy song. Sometimes I like catchy songs but the other stuff (she pointed to the blue box) is *waaay* more creative.’

Matthew S offered his opinion on the blue poems, ‘Those poems are really interesting. They make you think about things in different ways. They are really creative.’

I thought of Stevens' lines, 'Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar.' Creativity was clearly something that Stevens, the class and I valued.

'But there are some really hard words in some of these poems,' I said, pointing to the blue box. 'Does that matter to you?'

Natalie's hand shot up, 'No 'cos you can usually still understand the poem especially if you picture what's happening using "Ben's technique".'

Ben, the lover of Imagist poetry mentioned above, looked pretty pleased with himself. His experiences with dyslexia, and his talent for visual thinking, led him to create a visual method to help his peers understand poetry.

I asked the class, 'Which poems are easier to picture?' Again the class pointed to the blue box. 'Why is that?' I queried.

Charli replied, 'The metaphors and similes make me see interesting things in my head.'

I pointed to the green box, 'What about these poems? Is it easy to picture what is happening in these too?'

Matthew W replied, 'Nope, that poetry just sounds nice but it can get pretty boring after a while.'

Ultimately, the green box poetry, whilst covering subjects familiar to the class such as bullying and homework, was thought of as 'fun' but lacking in substance. With titles like *Don't Do That*, it was packed with morals and

messages but offered little else for the imagination. The children lost interest after a few readings:

Policeman, Policeman

Policeman, policeman

don't catch me!

Catch that boy

behind that tree.

He stole apples,

I stole none:

Put him in the jailhouse,

just for fun.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance it appeared that the children and I valued creativity over didacticism. However, there are a great many children's texts which are both imaginative and didactic. Charlotte Smith, for example, wrote some wonderful imaginative and didactic poetry. Furthermore, an imaginative subject may be rendered boring by an uninspired execution. The problem with the green box was that the poetry was ultimately boring. My experiment would have made it easy to view the poetry with a dualistic mindset. Indeed there has been a long history of viewing children's literature in this light.

The two boxes of poetry in Room Nineteen represent two approaches to children's literature which are often pitted against each other. The green box embodies the 'Didactic' approach and the blue box characterises the 'Imaginative'

style. Both of these approaches have long histories which stem from evolving, converging, and at times conflicting concepts of childhood.

Regardless, it was clear that the class, Mrs Pickett, and I did not want to be force fed the boring green stuff because it was 'good for us'. Instead we wanted an adventure. We wanted to learn something new and we wanted to see a world with new eyes. We wanted to:

Take a poem

and hold it up to the light

like a colour slide

or press an ear against its hive...

drop a mouse into a poem

and watch him probe his way out,

walk around the poem's room

and feel the walls for a light switch...

waterski across the surface of a poem

waving at the author's name on the shore.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Noyes, 'The Highwayman', *Collected Poems* (Fairbanks: Project Gutenberg, 2009), p. 192, Project Gutenberg ebook, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30501/30501-h/30501-h.htm>> [accessed 21 May 2014].

<sup>2</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 165.

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<sup>3</sup>Anon, 'Policeman, Policeman', *Don't Do That*, ed. by Morag Styles and Helen Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Billy Collins, 'Introduction to Poetry', *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), p. 58.

## Introduction: Evolving Concepts of Childhood and Poetry

The evolution of adult attitudes towards childhood, apparent in poetry written for, and about, children, is the key focus of this thesis. I ground this analysis of poetry within the wider historical concepts of both poetry and childhood. My examination begins in the early eighteenth century in Great Britain. At this time childhood was clearly recognised as distinct, and unique, state. ‘The “new world of children”[was] in full flower’<sup>1</sup> and children’s texts were in demand.

I open my investigation with Isaac Watts’ influential collection *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (1715), a text which focused on the formative years as a critical stage of development. My study concludes in 1885 with an examination of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses*. Like *Divine Songs*, *A Child’s Garden* emphasises the importance of childhood, albeit in a decidedly different manner and with a very different intent. Stevenson sought to protect childhood, whereas Watts hoped to improve the child. Both writers focused on youth for the *good of the adult*. Watts also wrote for the *good of the nation*.

Watts’ *Divine Songs*, written in the long-standing didactic tradition, centres on the education, development and spiritual health of children, all of which were significant concerns in the ‘new world of children’.<sup>2</sup> The collection embodies the eighteenth century approach to child-raising; it focuses on developing children’s moral characters and conquering their inherent ‘naughty passions’.<sup>3</sup> The mismanagement of children has grave ramifications, stressed

Watts. He believed in the maxim ‘the children are the future’ and laboured to redeem young sinners for the good of his country.

Watts’ heavy handed style is indicative of much eighteenth century writing for children and this approach continued well into the nineteenth century, albeit in a somewhat softened form. However, by the end of the nineteenth century change was afoot. Children were granted greater freedom to play, imagine, learn and experiment and this was reflected in poetry. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden* champions these “new virtues” and his collection, like poetry from the blue box, and a small amount from the green box, encourages imagination, freedom, adventure, wonder and instructs the reader in the importance of play.

The shift in attitudes towards childhood, as seen in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, has coloured contemporary concepts of poetry for, and about, children. I focus on the period from 1715-1885 because of the changes that took place in this era. Debates about didacticism and the imagination continue, but from the end of the Victorian era onwards the emphasis on learning through creativity and play has remained a constant. This thesis does not chart the subtleties of perceptions of poetry for, and about, children in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as this falls outside of the scope of my study. However, I do briefly touch on creativity as one of the “new virtues” of children’s poetry in the twentieth century.

Gillian Avery explains that the poetic portrayal of children is coloured by the fashions of its era, including those virtues which adults have deemed necessary, ‘desirable, attractive, or interesting in the young’.<sup>4</sup> She writes that the

star of children's texts may be, 'the obedient, diligent, miniature adult', the pious, 'evangelical child', or an inspiring young intellectual promoting 'self-knowledge and independence'. In recent times the hero is often a cheeky scamp with 'a penchant for sprightly mischief'.<sup>5</sup> This free and imaginative creature embodies 'fun', risk, adventure and play.

Avery's categories are helpful, but do tend to fall into the dualistic trap of "Green" versus "Blue" box poetry. Her 'stars' still function as either didactic exemplars or inspiring free spirits and her view of the history of the genre is of a progression away from didacticism towards imagination and 'fun'. This thesis seeks to explore whether this division of poetry for, and about, children is as clear cut as Avery's categories suggest. Does creativity oust didacticism over time or do the two currents co-exist and at times merge as I have suggested above? Is my class' perception that didactic poetry is 'boring' and imaginative poetry is 'fun' warranted, or do these views simply reflect shifting cultural viewpoints?

To answer these questions I draw on the theories of Lawrence Stone and Alan Richardson while situating poetry for, and about, children within its historical context. My methodology revolves around a close analysis of selected poems on childhood and this analysis forms part of a discussion as to how these poems are embedded within wider historic and philosophical contexts. In exploring these poems I reveal the historical perceptions of both education and poetry and poetry and fun. I identify the divergences between the "Didactic" and the "Imaginative" strands of children's poetry, but argue that while the Blue and Green Box approaches to both poetry and childhood are helpful, they are by no

means exclusive or opposed. At times these two styles have been combined or blended with other modes in the variegated history of both poetry and childhood.

In teasing out these overlapping perceptions of poetry I tap into four main philosophical concepts of 'The Child'. The 'Religious' or 'Christian' view (which I sometimes refer to as the Didactic or Green Box approach), and the 'Utopian'<sup>6</sup> view are borrowed from Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500 - 1800*. The 'Transcendental'<sup>7</sup> view is a term from Richardson's *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780 - 1832*. The final category, the Imaginative approach (which I sometimes refer to as the "Creative" or Blue Box view) is of my own devising. This approach is discussed more briefly.

The history of childhood is diverse but the history of poetry is considerably longer. Throughout its lengthy existence poetry has been considered a philosophical practise with poets delving into questions of existence, knowledge, morals and language. From a practical point of view poetry's orderly structure has seen it used as an aide memoire to pass on cultural and religious knowledge. It has also been used as an instrument of worship, combining philosophical and moral teachings in a memorable and enjoyable format.

The practice of poetry may even predate literacy with some of the oldest surviving oral narratives being composed in verse. The Indian Vedas, most likely the oldest works of Hindu literature, may date back as far as the seventeenth century BCE. In Western literature, two of the oldest surviving works, the *Iliad*

and the *Odyssey*, were ‘written in poetic form’.<sup>8</sup> Both of these poems were composed around the eighth century BCE.

As the Vedas demonstrate, poetry can be an evocation of the divine and, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* show, an art-form designed to bring pleasure. In other instances poetry is thoroughly risky and may inspire a frenzied ecstasy. Both readers and poets have experienced poetry’s ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.<sup>9</sup> It has been the voice of social, political and artistic movements and has been used to ‘make it new!’<sup>10</sup> thereby inspiring its own evolution as an art-form. Its devices and musical qualities have inspired pleasure and, finally, as current theories of poetry reveal, it has been considered a predominantly creative practise.

The precision and brevity of poetry means that it can provide a concentrated cultural “snapshot”. On one level a poem acts as a unified form made up of a ‘structure of vaults upon a point of light’;<sup>11</sup> the point of light being the idea aided by the artful form. T.S Eliot described this as: ‘the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation’.<sup>12</sup> For philosophical and religiously minded poets like Eliot, poetry may be ‘the visible reminder of invisible light’.<sup>13</sup> Utopian poets show that although ‘Our gaze [may be] submarine’, the poetic imagination can direct it ‘upward [to] see the light that fractures through unquiet water’.<sup>14</sup> The evolving ideas about society, religion, philosophy, knowledge, reality and sensation are explored in “The World of Poetry”. Each poem discussed in this thesis captures and pinpoints the evolving ideas about childhood.

To present these ideas about poetry and childhood, I focus on a range of British poets writing for, or about, children from 1715 to 1885. The work of Isaac

Watts, William Blake, Charles and Mary Lamb, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, William Wordsworth, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and Robert Louis Stevenson is a particular focus, although other voices are touched upon more briefly. The poems which feature contain at least one concept of The Child, and one theory of poetry. In many poems several ideas about childhood and poetry are combined.

The majority of texts I discuss are written for 7 to 14 year olds. This is because before age 7 children are often learning to read and their reading material is simpler. After age 14, the content and style of children's texts becomes more mature and so reveals less about childhood. However, some texts do fall outside these parameters if they are especially concerned with childhood. For example, I discuss Wordsworth's work, although it was written for an adult audience, because his vision of the Transcendental child has been influential.

The poems featured contain, for the most part, two voices; the voice of the child, which may or may not be authentic, and the voice of the adult, which is often concealed. The hidden voice reveals adult hopes and concerns, whether conscious or unconscious, and at certain times it reinforces gender stereotypes, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not.

Ina Rae Hark writes that: 'one of the irresolvable dilemmas of civilization involves the conflict between the freedom of the individual and the stability of the social organism that contains him'.<sup>15</sup> Within this thesis the 'social organism' is frequently referred to as the "Inside" group. Where the term "Insider" is used it refers to individuals whose actions and philosophies are in harmony with the

society in which they live. Individuals whose philosophy and actions differ greatly from the dominant group are referred to as “Outsiders”. The writers I discuss are often classed as Insiders or Outsiders. The terms Insider and Outsider are dualistic, however, many writers that feature earn both labels since society is not made up of a static club of Insiders. The individuals living within any group have diverse, and evolving, perspectives. Where the labels Insider and Outsider appear they are also used as “snapshots” to describe evolving philosophies of childhood or poetry *at a particular point* in time.

Throughout this thesis Wallace Stevens’ metaphor of the blue guitar is used to describe the idea of the poetic imagination through time. Stevens’ poetry, like all with poetry philosophical leanings, delves into the world of ideas, at times exploring ‘propositions about life’ with the ‘poet [being] the priest of the invisible’.<sup>16</sup> In other instances poetry is a ‘holy magic’<sup>17</sup> ‘smothered in beauty’.<sup>18</sup> Stevens’ definitions of poetry hint at one of the central contentions of this thesis, that the seemingly simplistic binary of the Didactic and the Imaginative is undercut by both the way in which the Didactic poets use an imaginative means of expression to communicate their ideas and the fact that the Imaginative poets are still seeking to influence their readers, maybe to be more creative and less dutiful, but to nevertheless change or reinforce behavior and attitudes.

Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz argues that poetry, particularly that with a philosophical bent, seeks to ‘make people better’<sup>19</sup> by offering inspired, imaginative and visionary wisdom. Likewise, influential prose works about childhood often seek to further the spiritual, social or intellectual development of

both adults and children, as the work of John Locke, George-Louis LeLerc, Comte de Buffon and Jean Jacques Rousseau reveals.

Poetic writing for, and about children, may be driven by the same desire to improve and inspire, and the work of Isaac Watts, William Blake, Charles and Mary Lamb, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and William Wordsworth is evidence of this. On the surface it may seem that Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and Robert Louis Stevenson focus less on improving children through poetry. Yet, it can be argued that their emphasis on fun, imagination and, in Stevenson's case, play also constructs a paradigm of idealised childhood behaviour and thinking, albeit for very different ends.

To provide a context for the ways in which the history of childhood and poetry converge, this introduction now turns to an exploration of the Christian, Utopian and Transcendental concepts of the child and provides a brief historical overview of the theories of poetry mentioned above. I conclude by signalling the way in which these ideas will be analysed in the poetry of my chosen authors.

In *Centuries of Childhood*, published in 1960, Phillipe Aries states that 'childhood', as a distinct state, is a relatively new concept and that prior to the 1500s children were treated like "little adults". Richardson explains that Aries' 'basic contention has been widely accepted, and indeed has changed the shape of social history'<sup>20</sup> and agrees that 'childhood' did indeed become 'significantly noticeable by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries'.<sup>21</sup> However, he contends that 'the "modern discovery of childhood" can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century'.<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of these dates, it cannot be doubted that by the end of the seventeenth century childhood was certainly in the spotlight. The texts of this era show the greater value placed on childhood. For example, John Locke's influential treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), critiqued common childrearing practices and provided recommendations to improve the health of children. *Some Thoughts* is perhaps most well known for its description of how the child creates knowledge.

Locke proposed that child is a 'tabula rasa', acquiring knowledge through sensation, and suggested studying child from birth to witness the 'natural' process of learning. As writers and thinkers explored the mechanism of learning, the merits of education also received more attention. Learning produces 'virtuous, able men',<sup>23</sup> wrote Locke, and along with physical wellbeing it must be 'the duty and concern of parents, [as] the welfare and prosperity of the nation so much depends upon it'.<sup>24</sup>

By the eighteenth century philosophies around the early formation of identity, as well as methods of education, were a particular focus. Like Locke, the eighteenth century French Naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count of Buffon, believed childhood held the key to understanding how the human brain constructs knowledge. He also emphasised the importance of education, explaining that to become 'thinking and rational',<sup>25</sup> the child must communicate with others and that a well-conceived education 'humanises' the child and 'set[s]the soul to work'.<sup>26</sup> In 1749 Leclerc published *The Natural History of Man*. This scientific study, written for the general populace, was the first to include childhood in its investigation of

mankind. The three volume work combined information on the anatomy, physiology and mental constitution of children with descriptions of child-raising practices from Europe and beyond.

Leclerc, like Locke, was concerned with children's health. He revealed that in the eighteenth century almost half of all children died in infancy. Troubled by such dire statistics he sought to increase public awareness of the vulnerability of newborns and recommended a country upbringing for at risk children, namely institutionalised orphans.

The 'spiritual principal' of all children, Leclerc added, 'is developed and perfected through 'education'.<sup>27</sup> The budding genre of children's literature reflected this view and religious and didactic texts were in considerable demand.

In the following century 'virtues and values' remained the favoured subject of children's poetry. Norejane J. Hendrickson and Nancy Taylor Coghill found that from 1800 to 1900 children's poetry frequently focused on developing the 'spiritual principal' of children. They examined 80 poems from the extensive John McKay Shaw collection and discovered that 23 of them overtly sought to improve children in some manner. They explain that this 'clearly indicates that poetry was being used to indoctrinate children throughout the century'.<sup>28</sup> Poetry was undoubtedly used to transmit moral and religious values. However, their use of the verb 'indoctrinate', announces a dualistic perspective and, as I have argued previously, the story of childhood in poetry is told by several voices rather than two in opposition.

## **The Religious View**

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Religious view of the child prevailed. It was underpinned by the concept of Original Sin and this view, says Stone, was ‘strongly reinforced by Calvinist theology’.<sup>29</sup> Proponents of this view maintained that the child’s natural propensity for sin must be controlled ‘by the most ruthless repression of his will and his total subordination to his parents, schoolmasters and others in authority over him’<sup>30</sup> and believed that only a firm authoritarian hand would curtail the child’s ‘naughty passions’.<sup>31</sup> Didactic texts stressed the need for complete obedience within a rigorously organized social system. Poetry from this era was typically religious, often reinforced gender roles, taught appropriate social conduct and emphatically sought to remedy children’s in-born faults.

‘All children are by nature evil’,<sup>32</sup> wrote Mary Martha Sherwood, ‘and while they have none but the natural evil principle to guide them, pious and prudent parents must check their naughty passions in any way that they have in their power’.<sup>33</sup> Sherwood’s lines capture the prevailing belief that those in authority must ‘force [children] into decent and proper behaviour and into what are called good habits’.<sup>34</sup>

Even Daniel Defoe, a writer considered progressive in the eighteenth century, wrote of the need for obedience. He instilled in *Robinson Crusoe* a sense of regret at not heeding his father’s word:

I have been, in all my circumstances, a memento to those who are touched with the general plague of mankind... for, not to look back upon my primitive condition, and the excellent advice of my father, the opposition to which was, as I may call it, my *original sin*, my subsequent mistakes of the same kind had been the means of coming into this miserable condition.<sup>35</sup>

In 'Obedience to Parents' Watts asks little sinners:

Have you not heard what dreadful plagues  
Are threaten'd by the Lord,  
To him that breaks his father's law  
Or mocks his mother's word?

What heavy guilt upon him lies!  
How cursed is his name!  
The ravens shall pick out his eyes,  
And eagles eat the same.<sup>36</sup>

Obedience was given to all authority figures, not just parents. Even in the nineteenth century, when there was increasing debate around the role of Church and State, most people adhered to the Church's rules and faith informed their daily lives.

Religion still remained an integral part of learning as the Hadow Report reveals:

The British and Foreign School Society, founded in 1808, and the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, founded in 1811, supported the monitorial systems of Joseph Lancaster and Dr Andrew Bell respectively. The principal aim of these systems was to impart to children of 6 years of age and upwards the rudiments of religious knowledge and of the 3 R's.<sup>37</sup>

Although public education was not compulsory until the 1870s, many British children received a public or private education if their caregivers could afford it. Those who were educated received at least a few years of instruction, with the majority remaining at school until age 10.

The focus on religion led to a plethora of instructive texts with many poems being written in the long-established didactic tradition, a style which has passed on religious and cultural knowledge, aided memorisation and brought pleasure for centuries.

Instructive verse appears in Ancient Sanskrit texts which were designed to aid recall and delight the reader. In the Middle Ages many of these texts were translated into Latin and Arabic to pass on details like 'knowledge of the stars'.<sup>38</sup> One of these texts was the '*Urjuza fi l-hudud* (a poem on the signs of the zodiac)<sup>39</sup> written around the eighth century by the astronomer al-Fazari.

Didactic verse continued to assist students in the early eleventh century with Fulbert, the Bishop of Chartres composing the following for his pupils:

Aldeberan stands out in Taurus,  
Menke and Rigel in Gemini,  
and Frons and bright Cazabalet in Leo.  
Scorpio, you have Galbalagrab;  
and you Capricorn, Deneb,  
You, Batanalhaut, are alone enough for Pisces.<sup>40</sup>

In the next century Avveroes extolled the virtues of the *Ibn Sina*, a medical text composed in verse, describing it as: ‘very appropriate for memorising and delighting the soul’.<sup>41</sup> Much later, in the eighteenth century, Watts wrote of similar didactic delights:

Verse was at first design’d for the service of God... There is a greater delight in the very learning of truths and duties this way. There is something so amusing and entertaining in rhymes and metre, that will include children to make this part of their business a diversion. And you may turn their very duty into a reward, by giving them the privilege of learning one of these songs every week, if they fulfil the business of the week well, and promising them the book itself when they have learned ten or twenty songs out of it.<sup>42</sup>

The popularity of Watts' didactic verse continued well into the Victorian era and this, combined with Coghill and Hendrickson's findings, demonstrates the ongoing demand for Didactic poetry in the nineteenth century:

In the 1850-59 period, when historians report more liberalism than earlier in children's literature, thirteen entries of the fifty-five are on the topic of God and Religion. In 1870-79, when more poor children were being given the opportunity to become educated, and again in the next decade, there are a number of poems on God and Religion (1870-79, twelve of fifty-five; 1880-89, eleven, of fifty-five).<sup>43</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the subject matter of didactic poetry began to change with other types of didacticism becoming popular. Henri Newbolt's 1897 poem 'Vitai Lampada', uses play to show the reader how team players succeed on the field and in life. In 1906 Rudyard Kipling wrote the didactic and imperialist poem *The Children's Song* which sings the praises of the: 'Land of our Birth, our faith, our pride / For whose dear sake our fathers died'.<sup>44</sup> Kipling joins Great Britain to God as he strives to make British citizens 'better' by poetry.

The subject matter of didactic poetry certainly widened at the end of the nineteenth century but the Religious view of the child still played a significant part in education as this report from the early twentieth century demonstrates:

Religious teaching should occupy an integral part of the national system of education. 'The teaching of religion is at the heart of all teaching'; 'An

education which leaves this instinct without acknowledgement must be defective, starving a child on a most important side of his nature'; 'The aim has been to give instruction in the Christian faith as a living thing with power over daily life'; - such pronouncements as these are typical of the spirit and purpose of the syllabuses issued by the West Riding of Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire, Middlesex and other authorities, for use in council schools, and recommended for adoption as a common basis of religious education in other schools.<sup>45</sup>

Even in contemporary, secular times the Religious approach continues to influence children's poetry. The Green Box texts *Don't Do That!* and *The Midnight Party* share common didactic aims by teaching morals, social niceties and facts or helpful rules. While didactic poetry of the twenty-first century is not typically religious, it seeks to improve children through poetry just as Watts' *Divine Songs* did 300 years ago.

### **The Utopian View**

In the eighteenth century another concept of the child appeared alongside the Religious view. I have borrowed a term from Lawrence Stone and labelled this the Utopian view. This concept is underpinned by the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, specifically his controversial 1762 treatise *Emile* in which he drew on the theories of Locke and Leclerc. Like Locke, Leclerc, Watts and proponents of the Religious view, Rousseau saw education as critical. However, he diverged

from the Christian approach when he declared that education must focus on preserving the child's natural goodness. He wrote: 'The education of the earliest years should be merely negative'<sup>46</sup> so as not to tarnish the child's natural goodness.

When it was time for formal learning to occur, at around age 12 for the fictional Emile, Rousseau emphasised that it must not centre on rote teachings about 'virtue or truth'<sup>47</sup> but instead it must focus on 'preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error'.<sup>48</sup> This attitude contrasted sharply with the Religious approach, which encouraged early memorisation of precepts to stave 'off some temptation'.<sup>49</sup> Rousseau considered memorisation futile.

Like Locke, Rousseau thought children formed knowledge through sensation, not memory. Children, he said, 'retain sounds, figures, sensations, rarely ideas, and more rarely their relations'.<sup>50</sup> Good teaching, he emphasised must be based on experience. He believed that impressions of experiences are stored in the subconscious in early life and are later drawn on to create memory. Rousseau, like Leclerc and Wordsworth, believed that a free and rustic environment was healthiest place for children to truly *experience* learning and gain fruitful unsullied knowledge. The Religious view, in contrast, sought to reign in an inherent knowledge of evil.

Rousseau chose to raise the fictional Emile in an Acadian setting: 'far from those miserable lacqueys, the most degraded of men except their masters; far from the vile morals of the town, whose gilded surface makes them seductive and contagious to children'.<sup>51</sup> The city imprisoned man, he said, by bending him to the

will of the institution. 'Good social institutions are those best fitted to make a man unnatural, to exchange his independence for dependence... so that he no longer regards himself as one, but as part of the whole'.<sup>52</sup> The repressed energy of the city starved the individual who is not 'made to be crowded together in ant-hills, but scattered over the earth to till it'.<sup>53</sup> Both Rousseau and Wordsworth believed that the unsullied peasant lives happy and free but 'civilized man is born and dies a slave'.<sup>54</sup> They maintained that peasant children are stronger, more natural and more content whereas city folk 'are devoured by towns'.<sup>55</sup> Both writers admired what Wordsworth termed 'low and rustic life'.<sup>56</sup> Emile's rustic education, designed by nature's free hand, would keep him genuine.

Like *Emile*, Wordsworth's semi-autobiographical poem *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind* emphasises the significance of childhood and describes the child's development in a natural setting. The poem, which Wordsworth began in 1798, is similar to Charlotte Smith's work in that it explores nature's influence on the poetic mind. Learning is a central motif, as the subtitle indicates, and Wordsworth employs the 'boy of nature' trope to protect his lead from society's adulterations.

Like Rousseau and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Wordsworth believed the child's inherent goodness would remain intact if children were granted freedom. He romanticised childhood and his nostalgic and Utopian view of the child occurred as a reaction to the Industrial Age. Education and industrialisation no doubt improved the prospects of many, however, with these advances came a

desire for a simpler and more innocent time and a collective nostalgia for the 'golden days' of childhood is apparent in much Romantic and Victorian writing.

*The Prelude* was written at a time when autobiography was in vogue. In previous years the tone of the genre became more intimate, as the title of Rousseau's *Confessions* reveals, and both fiction and non-fiction writers explored their own, or their characters', childhoods to better inform the reader of the adult's individual temperament. For Wordsworth, a return to childhood, through the nostalgic and poetic imagination, brought the adult greater wisdom, not only of their individual self but of humankind's clouded origins.

As the developing field of psychology began to examine childhood, the formation of memory became a key focus. In the eighteenth century the philosopher David Hume hypothesised that memory's persistence helped shape identity. Wordsworth's oft quoted line, 'The child is the father of the man',<sup>57</sup> drew inspiration from this theory. Hume asserted that 'memory not only discovers the identity' but also 'contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions'.<sup>58</sup> Yet imagination must fill memory's gaps. 'Nothing is more free than the imagination of man', he said, 'it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating and dividing' the 'original stock of ideas'.<sup>59</sup> The imagination 'can feign a train of events, with all the appearance of reality' and it may believe 'this with the greatest certainty'. Although, objects perceived by the individual 'are nothing but perceptions in the mind'.<sup>60</sup> Therefore the sense of self, based on the persistence of memory, must depend upon the 'fictions of the imagination'.<sup>61</sup>

The Romantic view of the child, along with the Transcendental view, which I discuss in the next section, found inspiration in these potentially problematic ‘fictions’. In 1817 Samuel Taylor Coleridge posited the idea of an organic, unconscious and spontaneous ‘Primary Imagination’ which is ‘the living power and prime agent of all human perception’.<sup>62</sup> The ‘Primary Imagination’, supported by the ‘Secondary Imagination’ ‘is, an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will... It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate’.<sup>63</sup> Wordsworth’s Utopian, Transcendental and Imaginative poetry epitomizes this re-creation. By consciously employing the nostalgic imagination he returned to childhood to revisit his ‘original stock of ideas’.<sup>64</sup> This return, enabled by the freedom and flexibility of the nostalgic imagination, brought him philosophical insight, renewed inspiration and the ability to ‘recreate’ through the temporary dissolution of the adult self. For Wordsworth ‘memory not only discover[ed] the identity’<sup>65</sup> but revitalised his own ‘living power’,<sup>66</sup> leading to a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.<sup>67</sup> This overflow found its expression in poetry; the ‘supreme fiction’<sup>68</sup> of the imagination. As the Romantics shifted the focus from reason to sensibility, they placed high value on the poetic imagination; ‘the mightiest lever / known to the moral world’.<sup>69</sup>

## **The Transcendent View**

*A poet is a light and winged and sacred thing.*<sup>70</sup>

Growing out of the Utopian perspective is the Transcendental view. This view, epitomised in Wordsworth's poetry, asserts that the newborn's innocence stems from a divine origin, and that they are born 'trailing clouds of glory'.<sup>71</sup> The child serves as a figure of hope and an emblem of humankind's divinity. Wordsworth used poetry to remind the adult reader of their original divine nature as, like his contemporary Barbauld, he believed truth and goodness resided in the child since, by proximity, they were closer to God.

Poetry has been joined with philosophy, and transcendental knowledge, for an extraordinarily long time. The Ancient Greeks believed that poetry grew from divine inspiration. Plato wrote:

Fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods... poets are merely the interpreters of gods, according as each is possessed by one of the heavenly powers. To show this forth, the god of set purpose sang the finest of songs through the meanest of poets.<sup>72</sup>

Like the Ancient Greeks, philosophically-minded poets like Wordsworth and Blake used poetry 'enlighten' their readers. Blake joined the idea of the "visionary poet" to an ancient divinity declaring:

Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who Present, Past and Future sees  
Whose ears have heard

The Holy Word,

That walk'd among the ancient trees.

After Blake's death some readers began to view his work as prophetic and sacred but during his life he lived as an outsider, wielding his poetry like a weapon to comment on social issues. His writing shows that poetry can be a risky business and the debate around his own mind saw him cast as the "mad poet", another stereotype with a long history.

The idea that poetry could stem from a divine madness has its roots in Ancient Greece. Plato wrote: 'God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers',<sup>73</sup> and when a poet is 'chosen' by God, their temporary madness may cause them to act outside the bounds of conventional society. In Plato's time the acoustic arts were thought to have 'a "manic" character'.<sup>74</sup> Tatarkiewicz explains that 'the Greeks included *music* together with poetry within the sphere of inspiration',<sup>75</sup> and dancing was also considered part of music. When practiced with other acoustic arts, poetry could be a 'source of frenzy and rapture',<sup>76</sup> and a blissful madness could ensue. This 'state of rapture' had the potential to be risky, transcendental, or both. Poetry and music, it was thought, had 'the power of stimulation and of mental purification' and so both art forms had 'moral and metaphysical significance'.<sup>77</sup>

A poet whose work embodies the metaphysical approach in more recent times is Wallace Stevens. He describes poetry as a philosophical practise which 'must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns'.<sup>78</sup> Stevens comes close to suggesting that the philosophic and poetic imagination could replace what he

termed the 'supreme fiction', or the idea of God. In his 1937 poem, 'The Idea of Order at Key West' he explores the ordering imagination while questioning, like Hume, the nature of reality. In 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', he evokes Plato's cave, writing: 'there are no shadows in our sun'<sup>79</sup> as he again examines the poetic imagination. Like Stevens, T.S Eliot links poetry to a philosophy of religion with the words: 'men must proceed from light to light, in light of the Word'.<sup>80</sup>

Wordsworth's philosophical poetry joins the 'human divine' to both the natural world and language. In the country, he writes, 'the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature',<sup>81</sup> leading to a 'more permanent, and far more philosophical language'.<sup>82</sup> He employs this 'philosophical language' in *Lyrical Ballads* to help his readers transcend a tainted society. In the country, he muses, 'the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language'.<sup>83</sup> These straightforward feelings, he believed, led to better communication, and contemplation, of ideas. He considered the peasant's manner more 'durable', believing that their conduct stems 'from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations'. Their manners, he said, are 'more easily comprehended' since country folk, 'being less under the influence of social vanity, convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions'.<sup>84</sup> Wordsworth's adult characters are wistful outsiders, observing childhood through their own nostalgia and village life through idealistic eyes. For Wordsworth transcendence is possible if the individual heeds the simple wisdom of the child and nature.

## **Freedom, Imagination, Fun, and Adventure: The New Virtue of Creative Play**

In the decades following Wordsworth's death there was a growing preference for texts which I have labelled Blue Box. This category of texts grew out of the Utopian and Transcendental concepts of childhood as well as the gradual dissolution of child labour. The Education Act, passed in 1870, resulted in significant change and this affected children's texts. Prior to that time children's socio-economic backgrounds likely determined their reading material. Taylor and Coghill explain that in the mid-1800s:

There were two distinct codes of behaviour for children. One code was for the leisure class, the other for working class children who were not afforded time to play. These codes determined the type of reading materials offered to children.<sup>85</sup>

After the 1870s, the 'Golden Age' of the child gathered momentum. A.S. Byatt, in her insightful novel *The Children's Book*, writes that by the turn of the century:

Writers and teachers saw, in a way earlier generations had not, that children were people, with identities and desires and intelligences. They saw that they were neither dolls, nor toys, nor miniature adults. They saw, many of them, that children needed freedom, needed not only to learn, and be good, but to play and be wild.<sup>86</sup>

Play, fun, freedom and imagination became a significant focus, fuelled by the popularity of Rousseau and Wordsworth's work and a story developed that was

‘almost Manichaeic in its need to dichotomize, and then to extol or damn its dichotomized terms’.<sup>87</sup> William McCarthy explains that as the canon of children’s literature has evolved a historical conflict between “instruction” and “delight,” “didacticism” and “imagination”<sup>88</sup> has ensued. To illustrate this, in 1932 Fredrick Joseph Harvey Darton, a highly respected authority on children’s literature, wrote: ‘Children’s books were always the scene of a battle between instruction and amusement, between restraint and freedom, between hesitant morality and spontaneous happiness’.<sup>89</sup>

The emphasis on amusement and imagination has had a particular effect on the canon and in contemporary times creativity and fun have been upheld as the prime values of children’s poetry. This view has been aided by the work of Romantic, Modernist and Nonsense poets as well as the contemporary belief that poetry is primarily an aesthetic practice. Creative, joyful and fanciful texts have been applauded whereas books with “didactic” intent or a “rationalist” agenda<sup>90</sup> have been derided. Indeed, my own initial preference for the Blue Box approach is likely a result of this as the battle between didacticism and creativity still continues in children’s literature.

## The Shape of the Discussion

To demonstrate the ways in which current perceptions of childhood and poetry have evolved and the strands of the Didactic and the Imaginative are intertwined, I begin with an exploration of Isaac Watts' didactic verse. In 'Chapter One: The Virtue of Verse in the Eighteenth Century' I describe Watts' poetic theory; that verse is the perfect vehicle for the Lord's teachings as its pleasurable qualities entertain while informing young readers. However, Watts tempers his readers' enjoyment by delivering his lessons in the voice of a stern and paternalistic adult. Chapter One discusses Watts' primary aim; to transform children into good "little adults". Children must obey their Heavenly Father, he stresses, not only for their own salvation, but also *for the good of the nation*. I discuss Watts' imperialist theology by pointing to the ways in which he presents England as God's 'chosen' country.

The second chapter, 'Defending Childhood: The Multiple Voices of William Blake', explores Blake's wish to transcend the fierce puritan morality of writers like Watts. Blake asserts that childhood must not be sacrificed in an attempt to mould children into good "little adults" and emphatically rejects any attempts to shape and "systematise" children in the name of the Church and the nation's progress. Blake makes oppression apparent by speaking from varying viewpoints, including the child's. I discuss the way in which he uses the child's voice as a defence against those who threaten the innocence, individuality and freedom of youth.

In 'Chapter Three: Exploring Didacticism: Gender and Poetry in the late 1700s and Early 1880s' I examine the poetry of Charles and Mary Lamb to show how writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reinforced gender roles and sought to improve social conduct. The following stereotypes are a particular focus: the active, manly little lad, the intellectual and literary boy and the passive and domesticated young lady.

Adding to the diverse voices of this era is the proto-feminist work of Charlotte Smith and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. In Chapter Four, 'Women on the Outskirts', I discuss the ways in which their writing celebrates the strong, intellectual and wise female pedagogue.

Wordsworth's visionary child, a figure of hope and transcendence, is explored in Chapter Five. Like Blake, this child is naturally innocent and divine. I discuss how Wordsworth used nostalgia to return to this divinity and how this return brought him renewed inspiration and insight.

In Chapter Six, 'Organised Fun; The Nonsense of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll', I highlight the shift in attitudes towards children with pleasure becoming an additional focal point in children's texts. I discuss Lear and Carroll's 'system' of fun, analysing the structure of their verse to highlight the ways in which their work is shaped for enjoyment. Lear's limericks are examined to demonstrate how he celebrated the eccentric, imaginative and fun-loving Outsider.

In the final chapter, 'Child's Play; Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*', I investigate the diverse, and at times contradictory, ways in

which Stevenson portrays childhood. *A Child's Garden* presents childhood as a time of innocence, imaginative freedom and fun but a time also marked by uncertainty and sometimes anxiety. As a Victorian, Stevenson's work reflects the period in which he wrote, yet definite traces of Romanticism remain as signs of a developing Modernist perspective begin to emerge. Despite his sometimes disparate portrayal of youth, one constant pulls everything together; a love of play which Stevenson considers the cherished quality of youth.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice 1780-1832* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Richardson, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Joseph Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Gillian Avery, 'Children's Books and Social History', in *Research About Nineteenth-Century Children and Books. Portrait Studies*, ed. by Selma K. Richardson, Selma K. Richardson (Illinois: Illinois University, 1980), 23 - 40 (p. 23).

<sup>5</sup> Avery, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800* (New York: ACLS Humanities, 2013), Amazon.com ebook.

<sup>7</sup> Richardson, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, ed. by William Richey and Daniel Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p. 393.

<sup>10</sup> Ezra Pound, *Make it New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934)

<sup>11</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> T.S Eliot, 'Choruses from "The Rock"', *Arak-29*, updated 2011, <[http://www.arak29.am/PDF\\_PPT/6-Literature/Eliot/Chtherock\\_eng.htm](http://www.arak29.am/PDF_PPT/6-Literature/Eliot/Chtherock_eng.htm)> [accessed 25 January 2015].

<sup>13</sup> Eliot, 'Choruses'.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot, 'Choruses'.

<sup>15</sup> Ina Rae Hark, 'Eccentricity and Victorian Angst', *Victorian Poetry*, 16. 1/2 (1978), 112-122, <<http://jstor.org/stable/40002589>> [accessed 3 November 2012]. p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Stevens, 'Hieroglyphia', *Opus Posthumous*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Bart Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (Missouri: University of Missouri, 2002), p. 268, <<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=10048223>> [accessed 14 February 2015].

<sup>19</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'Art and Poetry', *StudiaLogica*, 2.6 (2013) 383 - 384, <[http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina\\_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf](http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf)> [accessed 20 April 2014], p. 381.

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- <sup>20</sup> Richardson, p. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Richardson, p. 8 - 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Richardson, p. 8 - 9.
- <sup>23</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2004), Amazon.com ebook.
- <sup>24</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.
- <sup>25</sup> Adriana S. Benzaquen, 'Childhood, Identity and Human Science in the Enlightenment', *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004), 34-57  
<<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/25472723>> [accessed 2 February 2012] p. 40.
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## Chapter One: The Virtue of Verse in the 1700s: The Didactic

### Poetry of Isaac Watts

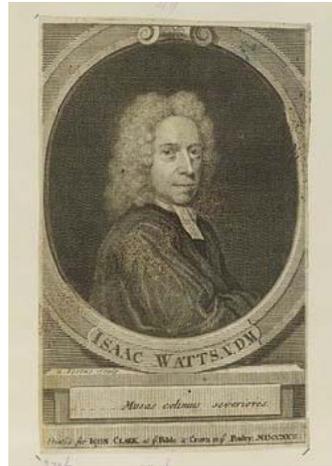


Fig. 1.  
*Isaac Watts 1674 –1748*

To all that are concerned in the Education of Children. My Friends, It is an awful and important charge that is committed to you. The wisdom and welfare of the succeeding generation are intrusted with you beforehand, and depend much on your conduct. The seeds of misery or happiness in this world, and that to come, are oftentimes sown very early, and therefore whatever may conduce to give the minds of children a relish for vertue and religion, ought in the first place be proposed to you.

*Isaac Watts*<sup>1</sup>

A poet who epitomises the Didactic mode of poetry for children is the eighteenth century writer and clergyman Isaac Watts. Betterment of the self, the wider community and the nation is the leitmotif of his poetry. Improvement is possible,

says Watts, through God's grace and an adherence to his teachings and examples. After placing Watts within the religious and imperial context of his day, this chapter explores his emphatic warning to parents and educators; disregard children's moral and spiritual development and you add to mankind's disgrace. Lessons in moral conduct and godly thinking are essential and it is your duty to deliver them as early as possible.

It is in Watts' poetry that the clearest division between the Didactic and the Imaginative is apparent, with fun and play regarded as neither the fit subject for poetry nor as pursuits that will benefit the child.

For Watts, childhood is a state fraught with temptation and danger, and so it must be carefully monitored, and weaknesses expunged, for the good of the soul. Drawing on poetry to advance his cause, Watts published the didactic collection *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* in 1715 to eradicate 'the seeds of future devils'.<sup>2</sup> Without spiritual guidance Watts feared children would succumb to the trap of sin. Parents must therefore give children texts to 'assist the devotion of their younger years, and to encourage and confirm them in the principles and practices of all moral and divine virtues'.<sup>3</sup> Watts combined the power of language with the wisdom of religion to achieve his goal:

Blest be the wisdom and the power,  
The justice and the grace,  
That join'd in council to restore  
And save our ruin'd race!

Our father eat forbidden fruit,  
And from his glory fell;  
And we, his children, thus were bought  
To death, and near to hell.<sup>4</sup>

Religious and didactic poetry, he believed, distanced children from their dangerous origins and helped set them on the trail to glory.

In this chapter I examine several didactic poems from *Divine Songs* to show how they present the Religious concept of the child. Two of Watts' poems, 'Against Scoffing and Calling Names' and 'The Advantages of Early Religion', form a special focus as I draw attention to the authoritarian and paternalistic perspective from which he writes. I begin with a description of Watts' formative years, illustrating the ways in which his Nonconformist family provided him with certain virtues and values which he later drew upon as he sought to influence the nation.

Watts' birth occurred amidst social and theological upheaval. It was 1674 and English prisons held many dissenters. His father, a Nonconformist deacon, awaited the news of his firstborn's birth from a cell. For a year his wife Sarah visited him, nursing Isaac on the steps outside. As radical outsiders, the family felt the pang of another split when Watts senior was incarcerated nine years later. During his father's absence young Isaac discovered Greek. The precocious child possessed an innate gift for language, speaking Latin at four and mastering several other languages by thirteen. Several benefactors offered him tuition at Oxford and

Cambridge, but both universities required him to break with the Nonconformists. Isaac, who inherited his father's rebellious streak, remained steadfast. He chose a Nonconformist academy and after graduating, tutored, wrote hymns and continued his religious studies. Watts reached the position of minister in 1702 and, after gaining over a decade's experience as a preacher he composed *Divine Songs*. This didactic text became an essential part of the school curriculum for the next 200 years.

Eager to disperse God's message throughout Great Britain, Watts worked to bring more energy to worship and composed the enduring hymns, 'Joy to the World', 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross' and 'O God, Our Help in Ages Past'.

### **Watts' Poetic Theory**

For Watts, poetry was both a spiritual practice and a method of transmitting knowledge. As an accomplished poet, verse was the perfect vehicle for his moral teachings and he employed its rhythmical, musical and pleasurable qualities to help children learn their precepts 'by heart'.<sup>5</sup> Didactic verse, he wrote: 'will allure children to read'<sup>6</sup> and its 'catchy' moralisms may become 'a constant furniture for the minds of children'.<sup>7</sup> He explains:

What is learnt in verse is longer retained in memory, and sooner recollected. The like sounds and the like number of syllables exceedingly assist the remembrance. And it may often happen, that the end of a song

running in the mind may be an effectual means to keep off some temptation, or incline to some duty, when a word of scripture is not upon the thoughts.<sup>8</sup>

Christian didactic verse offers excellent protection from sin as ‘Verse was at first design’d for the service of God’<sup>9</sup> and the right kind of verse gives children:

...something to think upon when alone, and sing over to themselves. This may sometimes give their thoughts a divine turn, and raise a young meditation. Thus they will not be forced to seek relief for an emptiness of mind out of the loose and dangerous sonnets of the age.<sup>10</sup>

Watts believed poetry’s enchanting qualities, when used well, offer the reader heavenly bliss, however, when these qualities are used wrongly, poetry is a risky business. ‘Idle, wanton, or profane songs’ give ‘an ill taint to the fancy and memory’<sup>11</sup> and, by providing ‘loose and dangerous’ mindless ‘relief’,<sup>12</sup> they bring the child into great peril.

The frenzied riskiness of the Restoration poets, epitomised in John Wilmot’s risqué writing, romps around on the opposite end of the poetic spectrum to Watts piety:

Much wine had passed, with grave discourse  
Of who fucks who, and who does worse.<sup>13</sup>

Watts’ Christian poetry, in contrast, protects children from vice by infusing ‘their youngest breath’<sup>14</sup> with ‘the sweet work of prayer and praise’.<sup>15</sup> This work is

essential not only for the good of children's souls but the good of the nation and so educators must keep this in mind:

May the Almighty God make you faithful in this important work of education: may he succeed your cares with his abundant graces, that the rising generation of Great Britain may be a glory amongst the nations, a pattern to the Christian world, and a blessing to the earth.<sup>16</sup>

### **Reconciling The Faith of an Outsider: Watts' Theological Imperialism**

Keen to reconcile his Outsider beliefs, Watts sought to affirm 'the loyalty and indeed the patriotism of dissenters'<sup>17</sup> by relating 'the worship of the independent congregations to contemporary life'.<sup>18</sup> He laboured to 'make people better by poetry',<sup>19</sup> but the public remained wary of reform and Watts' non-conformism stirred up suspicion. To deflect any wariness Watts composed patriotic verse alongside his more directly religious poems to rouse nationalistic pride. He held up the 'fatherland' as a shining example, seeking to make the people of all nations better.

Imperialist theology infuses his verse, thereby reducing his Outsider status, for here he reflects the dominant and accepted attitudes of his day. Watts' spirited imperialism in the era of empire no doubt increased his popularity. In 'Psalm 47' he announces Britain's favoured status with the words: 'The British Islands are the Lord's'<sup>20</sup> where 'Abraham's God is known'.<sup>21</sup> In this reference to Genesis, God appears before Abraham, making a covenant with him and telling the 99 year old: 'I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and

kings shall come out of thee'.<sup>22</sup> God blesses Abraham and his offspring and promises them 'the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession'<sup>23</sup> where he 'will be their God'.<sup>24</sup>

John M. Hull argues that Watts evokes a British-Israel by 'simply [removing] the antiquated detail and [replacing] it with some contemporary reality'.<sup>25</sup> Hull quotes Watts to show this in more detail: 'the land of Canaan may be translated into Great Britain'<sup>26</sup> and the blessed nation will enjoy God's protection while all 'powers & princes, shields & swords / Submit before his Throne'.<sup>27</sup> Watts emphasises divine assistance to further reinforce the British-Israel analogy:

Our troops shall gain a wide renown  
By thine assisting Hand;  
'Tis God that treads the mighty down,  
And makes the feeble stand.<sup>28</sup>

Hull explains that Watts' work must be interpreted against 'the growing vision of worldwide British power'<sup>29</sup> realised in both the 1700s and the following century. As children began to embody the nation's expectations they were reminded 'on every occasion, of the great and invaluable privileges of being born in Great-Britain'<sup>30</sup> and were taught 'the excellency of the christian religion'.<sup>31</sup> Despite feeling the repercussions of mankind's first sin, Watts elevates England by placing the country 'near to heaven and himself, in the ministrations of his word'.<sup>32</sup> The people of England are especially chosen, he says, 'as a matter of divine choice and peculiar favour'<sup>33</sup> and the establishment of religious institutions in Great Britain, says Watts, is also a result of divine selection: 'He has built his

sanctuaries amongst us...and established his churches in the midst of us'.<sup>34</sup>

Patriarchal protection is offered through the Church system with Watts inviting believers to join in worship and return the Lord's 'obedience and love' so that they may 'behold [his] beauty' and thus 'be made happy forever'.<sup>35</sup>

Servility is compulsory with Watts urging believers to submit to God's will, 'as dear and obedient children'.<sup>36</sup> He employs paternalistic language, explaining that mankind exists in an infant state and so, there will be times when 'your heavenly father [will see] it needful to chasten you'.<sup>37</sup> As God's children, he writes, we must 'honour the sovereignty and the wisdom of God [the] Father, when he sees fit to take his rod in hand, and to instruct [us] in righteousness'.<sup>38</sup> Watts balances this warning by reminding his readers of their fortune: 'Blessed England, whom, He hath chosen, and caused to approach thus far towards himself!'<sup>39</sup> The country is specially 'invited to behold *the beauty of the Lord*, to return to our obedience and his love'<sup>40</sup> while other unfortunate nations are left in the cold:

And why was not the polite nation of China chosen too; And why not the poor Savages of Africa, and the barbarous millions of the American world? Why are they left in a dismal estrangement from God.<sup>41</sup>

England is favoured, says Watts, 'because it pleased thee'<sup>42</sup> but the fortunate country is also under obligation as Great Britain's subjects must serve as a shining example: 'Shine, mighty God, on Britain shine,' he wrote, 'With beams of heav'nly grace'.<sup>43</sup> He explicitly links God's power to England's, proclaiming: 'Reveal thy power through all our coasts, / And show thy smiling face'.<sup>44</sup>

The Lord's preference is clear says Watts:

Amidst our isle, exalted high,  
Do thou our glory stand,  
And, like a wall of guardian fire,  
Surround the fav'rite land.<sup>45</sup>

Watts calls for the devotion of other nations: 'Sing to the Lord, ye distant lands, / Sing loud with solemn voice'<sup>46</sup> and 'God will crown his chosen isle / With fruitfulness and peace'. 'God the Redeemer [will scatter] round / His choicest favors here'<sup>47</sup> but all nations not chosen by God shall look upon Britain and 'see, adore, and fear'.<sup>48</sup> Watts' vision shows how closely linked the Didactic and Utopian strands of poetry can be; his ideal of a British promised land is, he argues, realisable if God's will and God's word is heeded.

## The Paternalistic Adult Voice

The paternalistic tone of *Divine Songs* elevates Watts to a position of authority and lowers his readers, be they adults or children, to a position of subservience. *Divine Songs* delivers lessons in religion, morals and conduct, by demonstrating how robust moral instruction transforms the corrupted child and produces the virtuous adult. An authoritarian didactic style permeates the collection, particularly in ‘Against Scoffing and Calling Names’ when Watts delivers a lesson with a gruesome twist.



Fig. 2.

*DIVINE SONGS.*

---

But lips that dare be so profane  
To mock, and jeer, and scoff  
At holy things, or holy men,  
The Lord shall cut them off.

When children, in their wanton play,  
Served old Elisha so,  
And bade the prophet go his way,  
'Go up, thou bald head, go!'

God quickly stopp'd their wicked breath;  
And sent two raging bears,  
That tore them limb from limb to death,  
With blood, and groans, and tears.

Great God! how terrible art thou  
To sinners e'er so young:  
Grant me thy grace, and teach me how  
To tame and rule my tongue.



Fig. 3.

The preacher sets up an authoritarian atmosphere within the poem by addressing the reader in the manner of a stern father. The collective pronouns 'we' and 'our' appear in the first stanza, linking Watts to the young reader. Yet, the poet's position of power forges a rift between himself and the reader and the condescending tone destroys any attempts to build affinity. Watts' stern directive, 'must not', dominates the stanza's closing line and is characteristic of the

overbearing style of didacticism in the 1700s. In the cautionary second stanza the authoritarian tone intensifies with the personal pronouns ‘he’ and ‘his’ establishing distance between the poet and sinner.

In the third stanza, Watts details the horrifying consequences of ‘un-Christian’ speech and this warning likewise dominates in the fourth and fifth stanzas. The voice of the child is absent from these sections, with the voice of the disciplinarian poet instead condemning the ‘wicked’ play of children. Watts reminds readers of a gruesome Bible story in which a group of little children mock the prophet Elisha:

As he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and they mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up thou bald head.<sup>49</sup>

Elisha turns back to them, cursing them ‘in the name of the LORD’<sup>50</sup> and the little children pay dearly for their teasing as the curse brings ‘forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them’.<sup>51</sup> By using such a grim story, Watts sets up a climate of fear and retribution as he cannot appear as anything other than an authoritarian figure.

In the final stanza Watts uses the voice of the child to address God directly, but the voice is artificial, particularly in light of the fearsome scene that preceded it. Watts acts as a ventriloquist, using the child’s voice as a mouthpiece to appeal to God, asking for help to overcome the temptation of sinful speech. His choice of subject, combined with this urgent directive, reinforces the Christian

theory of child-raising by asserting that young readers need the guidance of a firm, judicial and pious adult.

### The Awful and Important Charge of Educators

In 'The Advantages of Early Religion' faith is depicted as the supreme insurance. Watts addresses God on behalf of parents, educators and, to a lesser degree, children, again emphasising the virtues of early faith, 'prayer and praise'.<sup>52</sup> The child appears as a passive entity who must be moulded into a good 'little adult'.



Fig. 4.

*DIVINE SONGS.*

---

'Tis easier work if we begin  
To fear the Lord betimes;  
While sinners, that grow old in sin,  
Are harden'd in their crimes.

'Twill save us from a thousand snares  
To mind religion young:  
Grace will preserve our following years,  
And make our virtue strong.

To thee, Almighty God, to thee  
Our childhood we resign:  
'Twill please us to look back and see  
That our whole lives were thine.

Let the sweet work of prayer and praise  
Employ my youngest breath:  
Thus I'm prepared for longer days,  
Or fit for early death.



Fig. 5.

In the second stanza 'childhood', like the prized bud of a flower, is offered up to God as 'no vain sacrifice'.<sup>53</sup> Yet it is adults who must choose to make this sacrifice and whether or not the child understands it is unclear. Watts uses the word 'devote', implying a commendable act of generosity, but giving also entails loss. By employing the personal pronouns 'we', 'our' and 'us', Watts alludes to a contract between all, but the child's perspective is side-lined and their true voice

does not feature. The child's purpose in the poem, as it is in many of Watts' poems, is to surrender to God and 'receive' his instruction:

To thee, Almighty God, to thee  
Our childhood we resign:  
'Twill please us to look back and see  
That our whole lives were thine.<sup>54</sup>

The child must 'submit' to God, a word which appears often in *Divine Songs*, along with 'resign', as seen above, and other directive verbs like 'obey', 'serve', 'receive', 'sacrifice', and the appeal, 'let me'. If parents and educators experience misgivings over the sacrifice, they may take comfort in the following:

The wisdom and welfare of the succeeding generation are intrusted with you...The seeds of misery or happiness in this world, and that to come, are oftentimes sown very early.<sup>55</sup>

For their own safety, the earlier children become "little adults", the better. Fear, says Watts, is a great motivator and without it children risk growing 'harden'd in their crimes'.<sup>56</sup> In the final stanza of 'Advantages' Watts makes the child's sacrifice more appealing, showing that a childhood of 'praise and prayer' provides the ultimate insurance; a joyous eternity in death.

The sacrifice theme appears again in 'Praise for Birth and Education in a Christian Land' with the child offering their youth to God with the line: 'To thee my youngest hours belong'.<sup>57</sup> Sacrifice appears once more in 'The Child's

Complaint' when Watts reminds the reader to devote their youth to God. He apologises on the child's behalf:

Why should I love my sports so well,  
So constant at my play,  
And lost the thoughts of heaven and hell,  
And then forget to pray?...

How senseless is my heart, and wild!  
How vain are all my thoughts!  
Pity the weakness of a child,  
And pardon all my faults.<sup>58</sup>

In 'Praise to God for Learning to Read' Watts again presses upon the child the need for the sacrifice of youth so that God may 'make [their] heart receive'.<sup>59</sup> The verb 'receive' demonstrates the need for openness as the child must be in a passive state to accept God's teachings and the 'wonders of his love'.<sup>60</sup>

Watts' work epitomises both the Christian concept of childhood and the Didactic concept of poetry. He uses poetry's rhythm to attract the reader and pass on valuable religious knowledge. He aimed to protect children from sin while asserting Britain's status as a 'chosen' country and with great hope he strove to populate Great Britain with pious citizens. His imperialistic, theological and didactic verse made its mark on the history of both childhood and poetry by inspiring educators, parents and children for over 200 years.

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- <sup>4</sup> Watts, 'Praise to God for Redemption', *Divine Songs*, p. 9.
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- <sup>6</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. VI, p. 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. vii.
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- <sup>10</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. vii.
- <sup>11</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. 76.
- <sup>12</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. vii.
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- <sup>15</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. viii.
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- <sup>18</sup> Hull, 'Isaac Watts'.
- <sup>19</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'Art and Poetry', *StudiaLogica*, 2.6 (2013) 383 - 384,  
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- <sup>22</sup> Genesis, 17. 6, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1990)
- <sup>23</sup> Genesis, 17. 6, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version*.
- <sup>24</sup> Genesis, 17. 6, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version*.
- <sup>25</sup> Hull, 'Isaac Watts'.
- <sup>26</sup> Hull, 'Isaac Watts'.
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- <sup>28</sup> Hull, 'Isaac Watts'.
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- <sup>36</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 573.
- <sup>37</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 573.
- <sup>38</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 573.
- <sup>39</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 173.
- <sup>40</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 173.
- <sup>41</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 173.
- <sup>42</sup> Watts, *The Works of The Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. I, p. 173.

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- <sup>43</sup> Isaac Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God, on Britain Shine', *Hymnary.org*,  
<[http://www.hymnary.org/text/shine\\_mighty\\_god\\_on\\_zion\\_shine](http://www.hymnary.org/text/shine_mighty_god_on_zion_shine)> [accessed 31 March 2014].
- <sup>44</sup> Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God'.
- <sup>45</sup> Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God'.
- <sup>46</sup> Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God'.
- <sup>47</sup> Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God'.
- <sup>48</sup> Watts, 'Shine, Mighty God'.
- <sup>49</sup> II Kings, 2:23, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version*.
- <sup>50</sup> II Kings, 2:23, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version*.
- <sup>51</sup> II Kings, 2:23, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version*.
- <sup>52</sup> Watts, 'The Advantages of Early Religion', *Divine Songs*, p. 30.
- <sup>53</sup> Watts, 'The Advantages of Early Religion', *Divine Songs*, p. 29.
- <sup>54</sup> Watts, 'The Advantages of Early Religion', *Divine Songs*, p. 30.
- <sup>55</sup> Watts, *Divine Songs*, p. v.
- <sup>56</sup> Watts, 'The Advantages of Early Religion', *Divine Songs*, p. 29.
- <sup>57</sup> Watts, 'Praise for Birth and Education in a Christian Land', *Divine Songs*, p. 14.
- <sup>58</sup> Watts, 'The Child's Complaint', *Divine Songs*, p. 58.
- <sup>59</sup> Watts, 'Praise to God for Learning to Read', *Divine Songs*, p. 22.
- <sup>60</sup> Watts, 'Praise to God for Learning to Read', *Divine Songs*, p. 22.

## Chapter Two: Defending Childhood; The Multiple Voices of William Blake

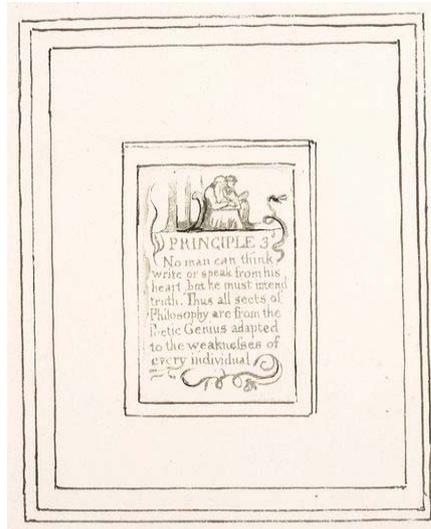


Fig 6  
*William Blake 1757 – 1827*

‘Without Contraries there is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.’<sup>1</sup>

William Blake, like his predecessor Isaac Watts, inhabited society’s periphery. A nonconformist in the widest sense of the word, Blake vehemently called for social change, sharing the same ‘awful and important charge’<sup>2</sup> as Watts, including the desire to ‘make people better by poetry’,<sup>3</sup> but articulated a much less authoritarian vision. For Blake creativity is central. He wrote: ‘I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another mans. I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create’.<sup>4</sup> Blake’s creativity manifested as a protest against all forms of tyranny ‘be

it mental, emotional, political or religious'.<sup>5</sup> While he celebrates Christ, he rejects the idea of a fearsome, cruel and dictatorial God. For Blake the idea of an authoritarian creator went hand in hand with an authoritarian church. Throughout his work institutions like the Church, and its attendant charity schools, are castigated for promoting subjection. Blake champions the outsider, often personified as Christ, the divine rebel. Resisting dualism, he also champions Satan, the ultimate Outsider, who he saw as a Promethean hero, representing freedom of thought and escape from religious enslavement. Blake engages this pair in a philosophical and poetic conversation that 'surge[s] against the progress of the physical world and [seeks], in heaven and hell, the meaning and destiny of man-on-earth'.<sup>6</sup>

The rampant industrial progress of the physical world saw Blake defending childhood and in horror he protested against loudly child labour, especially that which was valorised in the name of sovereign progress. As a precursor to the Romantics, he did not consider children "little adults" in the making. Blake privileged childhood just as he privileged the individual as is illustrated in the following analysis of several poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789).

## Transcending Puritan Morality



Fig. 7

*Europe: A Prophecy* by William Blake, 1794  
A papal figure, with wings of a bat, is depicted sitting on a throne.

Rather than guiding little sinners, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* reproaches the fallen adult. Blake's verse attacks the sermonising style of religious didacticism. With characteristic intensity, he rebels against the Church, blaming it for the suffering of innocent children. Social engineering greatly disturbed Blake and he saw the charity school system as 'a focus for society's fears more than its hopes'.<sup>7</sup> The church, he thought, used charity schools to "systematise" children and he rejected their heavy handed approach to education.

Revolt and the search for innocence are the central concerns of 'A Little Boy Lost' and 'The Little Boy Found'. Vivian De Sola Pinto explains that the pair of poems respond to the 'fierce Old Testament morality'<sup>8</sup> of writers like Watts who presents the deaths of his poetic children as an unfortunate, but necessary, sacrifice. For Blake it is 'murder, which evokes the horrified question: 'Are such things done on Albion's shore?''<sup>9</sup> Cruelty appalled him, especially that inflicted upon 'innocents' and he shunned oppressive and harmful philosophies. Both,

‘Lost’ and ‘Found’ symbolize the harmful ‘killing of the child-mind by the spirit of Puritan morality’.<sup>10</sup>

Watts sought to create good “little adults” whereas Blake honoured individuality, authenticity and freedom. In ‘Lost’ he demonstrates this with an extreme scenario and the lead character suffers a cruel demise similar to that of Watts’ naughty children. The little boy who declares: ‘naught loves another as itself, / nor venerates another so’,<sup>11</sup> is stripped, bound in iron chains and burnt for speaking his mind. The adult voice in the poem differs greatly from Watts’ and ‘the voice that describes the state of affairs’, writes Galia Benziman, ‘is not that of adults but that of ‘Blake’s imploring children’.<sup>12</sup> *Songs* is didactic but, as in Wordsworth’s poetry, it is the adults are instructed rather than the children.

The boy’s forthright remark, ‘naught loves another as itself’,<sup>13</sup> signals self-involvement. However, in the Blake canon divinity resides in the human form so self-involvement need not be negative. Jean Hagstrum explains Blake’s philosophy of the human divine: ‘Man creates God in his image, but that God also creates man in his...we become what we behold’.<sup>14</sup> A capacity for both divinity and fracture exists within this view. Blake prefers the boy’s truthful speech to the priest’s pious cruelty carried out in the name of a vengeful God. He inverts the idea of the holy venerated priest showing that even priests may be corrupted through a system which condones hellish acts. Blake agrees with John Milton that ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven’.<sup>15</sup>

Blake supports his 'human divine' theory with the illustration of the companion poem 'Little Boy Found'. The mother's head is surrounded by a halo and her face resembles Blake's drawings of Christ. Thomas E. Connolly and George R. Levine note that 'Blake, by interfusing the face of Christ with that of the earthly mother, attempted to suggest the interpenetration of the human by the divine'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout history Jesus has been portrayed as human, divine and innocent. In 'Found' the boy, a symbol of innocence, is led astray 'by the wandering light',<sup>17</sup> a dishonest will-o'-the-wisp which draws him away from the shelter of the path. However, God appears and, with a fatherly gesture, kisses the boy and leads him back to his weeping mother. The child is saved from death and returned to the divine, and human, path.



Fig 8.



Fig. 9

'Lost' and 'Found' exhibit the disappointment and dismay that frequently appear in many *Innocence and Experience* poems. Yet, in other poems Blake uses

contrast to describe a positive balance. In 'The Lamb' and 'The Tiger' an intense and divine creativity, coupled with the anger and fire of rebellion, is just as essential as the passive childlike innocence of the lamb and when Blake balances contraries they enable progression.

Blake emphasises God's peaceful and gentle innocence in the lines: 'He calls Himself a Lamb. / He is meek, and He is mild; He became a little child.'<sup>18</sup> Jesus, as the divine human, joins the innocent child to God but 'The Tiger' is the reverse, leading the awed narrator to query: 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?'<sup>19</sup> The fearsome creature represents the powerful energy of a bold and creative Christ. 'On what wings dare he aspire?' Blake asks. This ultimate 'Creator' draws on a passion, 'burning bright',<sup>20</sup> to combine his majestic energy with a gentle innocence. A sublime symmetry results, additionally reminding the reader of the balanced symmetry of the tiger's face. However, to appropriate a phrase from Proverbs: 'A false balance is abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight'.<sup>21</sup> Blake believes that unbalanced forces lead mankind astray like a little boy lost. However, when contrary forces are balanced the 'just weight' of 'Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate'<sup>22</sup> enables progression.

## **Blake's Contraries; Two Voices are Better than One**

*Songs of Innocence and Experience* is both a philosophical and a poetic work.

Elucidating on the themes of good and evil, real and ideal, childhood and adulthood, Blake, for the most part, reveals the downfall of dualistic thinking. The arrangement of the verse within a binary scheme reveals a crucial philosophy; that a 'single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing'<sup>23</sup> and that any attempts to homogenize disparate voices leads to dire consequences. 'Two classes of men are always upon the earth', Blake wrote, 'and they should be enemies: whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence'.<sup>24</sup> Organised religion 'is an endeavour to reconcile the two'.<sup>25</sup> E.P. Thompson argues that 'Blake's contraries describe the vital nature of Human life, especially of ideal society' and that 'the most important application of the doctrine of contraries with Blake is the social one'.<sup>26</sup> This is where his burning rebellion takes place.

In 'The Chimney Sweeper' (*Experience*) Blake holds a fictional, and fallen, reader, the employer of sweeps, responsible for the maltreatment of children. The sweeper is dressed by his employer 'in the clothes of death'<sup>27</sup> and taught 'to sing the notes of woe'.<sup>28</sup> Blake blames the fallen adult for the loss of childhood while additionally speaking to the socially concerned. The double audience is Blake's 'doctrine of contraries' put into action. He must create a conversation, based on contrary viewpoints, to really appeal to those who are socially concerned. If the viewpoints of the exploiter and the oppressed were left unaddressed, or were reconciled in the name of progress, the problem would

simply be 'swept' under the proverbial rug. Blake needs to create opposition as 'without Contraries there is no progression'.<sup>29</sup>

However, unbalanced contraries may result in a destructive struggle. Blake's vision of man's fall involves fragmentation and tension arises from this split. Individuals are unable to join 'harmoniously in one divine unity; there are only, in effect, pairs, opposites, contraries, and they are at war'.<sup>30</sup> 'In the world of innocence "all must love the human form" and all pray "to the human form divine"'.<sup>31</sup> However, those split from their original divine wholeness 'love only part of the human form...the "human form human"'.<sup>32</sup> This form exists in a world of its own making. It is the:

ravening world of the devourer; an adult world of responsibility... a dark, confined, dirty, urban world of palpable, not evanescent, blackness; a world of wandering and lostness, alehouses and churches; a world of "humanity caught in the act".<sup>33</sup>

In this ravening world every face bears 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe'.<sup>34</sup> The devourer, epitomized by the 'vast mill'<sup>35</sup> of the seething city, creates 'mind-forged manacles'<sup>36</sup> and this repression must be addressed to enable progression. In Blake's fallen world, humankind's systems enslave the individual by splitting them from their divine nature.

Humanity, as Wordsworth wrote in later years, is

melted and reduced

To one identity, by differences

That have no law, no meaning and no end - Oppression, under which even  
highest minds

Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Outsider Narrative; Blake Gives Voice to the Child**

In *Songs* the voices of innocents are contrasted with the voices of oppressive adults. Blake speaks through his poetic children, drawing attention to their maltreatment. Adult concerns drift beneath the surface and so his characters, like Wordsworth's, are like ventriloquists' dummies. Benziman notes that in the work of both writers the 'construction of the child is subservient to an adult vision, either of society, as in Blake, or of the self, as in Wordsworth'.<sup>38</sup> Blake's sees his cause as more important than experimenting with the authentic voice of the child. He believed that industrialized cities, and the Church, silenced and dehumanised the individual, and children were often the worst off. In 'London', 'the teeming, newly industrialized city... becomes a symbol of oppressed humanity'<sup>39</sup> and the 'dark satanic mills'<sup>40</sup> of 'Jerusalem' are as much a reference to churches as to the literal mills of the industrial revolution. What happened? Blake asks: 'Was the holy Lamb of God / On England's pleasant pastures seen?'<sup>41</sup> Could such a thing occur in a country where the system 'devoured' the individual, especially individual children? The 'Chimney Sweeper' poems speak on behalf of

‘manacled’ children, drawing attention to the terrible price of their labour and Blake’s ‘business is to Create’<sup>42</sup> opposing voices because without them resolution is impossible.

In the opening of the ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (*Experience*) Blake’s young character laments: ‘my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry, ‘Weep! weep! weep! weep!’<sup>43</sup> This young narrator addresses, and subtly blames, the adults in power. Weight is added to this censure with the possessive pronoun ‘your’. Blake writes, it is ‘your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.’<sup>44</sup> The first person pronoun, ‘I’, appears twice in one line, emphasising wrongdoing and leaving no doubt to who is misused. The church leaves the sweeper ‘out in the cold’ and the crying child, ‘a little black thing among the snow’, is forgotten.

A concerned adult appears, their voice adding weight to Blake’s argument with the question: ‘Where are thy father and mother?’<sup>45</sup> The ensuing discussion reveals parental and societal neglect; the sweeper replies, they have ‘both gone up to the church to pray’.<sup>46</sup>

The sovereign authority, the Church of England, claims the sweeper’s parents. The only adult in the bleak landscape is the lone questioner and their presence announces discontent with parental and societal neglect. The Church, by failing to address children’s maltreatment, is implicated. The adjective ‘little’ shows that society devalues the child. In the closing stanza to ‘The Sweeper’ (*Experience*) Blake writes: ‘And because I am happy and dance and sing, / They think they have done me no injury’.<sup>47</sup> The conjunction ‘because’, combined with ‘they think’, shows that adults have indeed caused a great injury. Blake contrasts a

bleak reality, the suffering of working children, with a valorised ideal based on the wilful ignorance of those in power; the adults and the heads of the Church.

The perverse 'Holy Trinity' of 'God and His Priest and King'<sup>48</sup> neglects the child's viewpoint, ignoring hell on earth by making 'up a heaven of our misery'.<sup>49</sup> The church, as the prime authority, adds to the misery of working children by stating that those 'do their duty'<sup>50</sup> will be granted access to heaven.

In 'The Chimney Sweeper' (*Innocence*) the sweeper's suffering is an ironic sacrifice. The immolation begins when the child's curling white hair, 'like a lamb's back, (is) shaved'.<sup>51</sup> The white lamb-like curls signify a holy innocence. The sweeper is told 'the soot cannot spoil your white hair',<sup>52</sup> foreshadowing the ashes of a sacrificial fire.

The adult voice is that of the deceiver, hushing up the child by pacifying them with myths. 'Hush', a disciplinary word, reduces the child's standing and trivialises, and overrides, the child's perspective. Tom is told to forget about his hair.

Tom's white hair is an emblem of purity. It has gone but will re-grow showing that the innocent child cannot be tainted by society's sin. Tom dreams of 'thousands of sweepers... all of them locked up in coffins of black'<sup>53</sup> and imagines rescue by an angel who, opening 'the coffins, and set(s) them all free'. The children run leaping and laughing through green plains to a river, evoking baptism as they wash themselves of society's dark sooty influence. Shining 'naked and white, their bags left behind',<sup>54</sup> they retain their youthful purity as God releases

them from their 'manacles'. They are resurrected in death to 'rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind'.<sup>55</sup>

The poem critiques the dictum of diligence for God. It is not the angel who tells Tom: 'if he'd be a good boy / He'd have God for his father, and never want joy',<sup>56</sup> it is tradition, promulgated by those in power; namely the King and his Church. The poem brings to light the slippery language of power which enables chimney sweeps to become 'martyred' through their virtuous hard work. Heaven will console, says Blake with sarcasm, because 'if all do their duty, they need not fear harm'.<sup>57</sup>

Blake's anger at child labour and organised religion saw him involved in the 'risky business' of poetry. He lived as an outsider, consumed by 'violent rebellion'<sup>58</sup> and was considered too radical for popular tastes. His intense creativity and attendant revelations led many to suspect insanity. Josephine A. McQuail writes that 'Blake was aware that innovative thinkers - himself among this class - are often labeled insane'.<sup>59</sup> Blake's boiling poetics saw him typecast as the 'wild poet' prone to both fits of madness and rapturous frenzy. The journalist and author William Fraser Rae wrote: 'It is impossible to doubt that William Blake was the maddest of authors and artists, and an extraordinary genius among madmen'.<sup>60</sup> 'After his death the idea grew that Blake's writings contained a 'divine truth'. William Norman Guthrie described Blake as a prophet and a mystic whose work was both philosophical and instructive. He exclaims: 'How wonderfully did Blake preach!'<sup>61</sup> For Guthrie, Blake's poetic inspiration was 'glimpsed in the utmost glory of his 'supreme delight'.<sup>62</sup>

The incredible complexity of Blake's work has seen him classed as a poetic genius, a madman and a mystic. Diverse motifs congregate within his writing. 'Revolt, poet-prophet-divinities, poetic ecstasy, dreams of a golden era which is now lost, the unity of knowledge and belief, the search for innocence and transcendence'<sup>63</sup> all jostle for space. Readers have interpreted his poetry as a philosophical practice, a means for transmitting divine knowledge, a method of imparting moral judgment and, of course, as an impassioned creative art form. Blake's qualms about the unchecked progress of a disgraced humanity are tied to a concern for the child and a wish to protect children from the 'ravaging' adult world of corruption. His verse asserts, emphatically, that children are not "little adults" and he adopts them as symbols of the individual, innocent and human divine. Perhaps more than any of the other poets considered in this thesis, Blake highlights that the Didactic and the Imaginative are not always opposites. His verse burns with a fervent desire to bring about change by shaking his readers out of their apathy. This fierce desire for a progression from the fallen to the Utopian links Blake to Watts' didacticism, although his anti-authoritarian agenda is the opposite of his predecessor's. Blake writes to share his vision, in some measure to 'instruct', but his hope is to infuse readers with the creative energy of the rebel rather than the passive obedience of the disciple.

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- <sup>1</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Boston: John W. Luce and Company, 1906), p. 7. Internet Archive ebook, <<https://archive.org/details/marriageofheaven00blak>> [accessed 30 September 2014].
- <sup>2</sup> Watts, *Songs*, p. 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Tatarkiewicz, Wladyslaw, 'Art and Poetry', *StudiaLogica*, 2.6 (2013) 383 - 384, [http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina\\_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf](http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf) [accessed 20 April 2014], p. 381.
- <sup>4</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (London: Pearson, 1877), p.10. Internet Archive ebook, <<http://archive.org/details/jerusalememanati00blak>> [accessed 16 August 2014].
- <sup>5</sup> Enid Rhodes Peschel, 'Themes of Rebellion in William Blake and Arthur Rimbaud', *The French Review*, 46. 4 (1973), 750 - 761 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/387649>> [accessed 6 June 2014], p. 754.
- <sup>6</sup> Frank O'Malley, 'The Wasteland of William Blake', *The Review of Politics*, 9.2 (1947), 183-204 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1404221>> [accessed 4 May 2014]. p. 184.
- <sup>7</sup> David Fairer, 'Experience Reading Innocence: Contextualizing Blake's Holy Thursday', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.4 (2002), 535 - 562 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> [accessed 6 June 2014]. p. 539.
- <sup>8</sup> V. de S. Pinto, 'Isaac Watts and William Blake', *The Review of English Studies*, 20.79 (1944), 214 - 223, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/509102>> [accessed 8 August 2014], p. 221.
- <sup>9</sup> Pinto, p. 221.
- <sup>10</sup> Pinto, p. 221.
- <sup>11</sup> William Blake, 'A Little Boy Lost', *Selected Poems of William Blake*, ed. by F.W Bateson (London: Heinemann, 1957), p 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Galia Benziman, 'Two Patterns of Child Neglect: Blake and Wordsworth', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 5.2 (2007), 167 - 197 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> [accessed 6 June 2014], p. 169.
- <sup>13</sup> Blake, 'A Little Boy Lost', *Selected Poems*, p 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake, Poet and Painter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p.128.
- <sup>15</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: J. Sharpe, 1809), p. Google ebook, <[https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=6yNWAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=6yNWAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)> [accessed 15 August 2014], p. 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas E. Connolly and George R. Levine, 'Pictorial and Poetic Design in Two Songs of Innocence', *PMLA*, 82.2 (1967), 257-264 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/461296>> [accessed 15 August 2014], p. 263.
- <sup>17</sup> Blake, 'A Little Boy Lost', *Selected Poems*, p. 27.
- <sup>18</sup> Blake, 'The Lamb', *Selected Poems*, p. 22.
- <sup>19</sup> Blake, 'The Tiger', *Selected Poems*, p. 23.
- <sup>20</sup> Blake, 'The Lamb', *Selected Poems*, p. 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Proverbs, 11.1, *The Holy Bible, The New King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1990)
- <sup>22</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, p. 7.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Bingham, 'Toward Dialogic Education' *Journal of Thought*, 35.4.(2000), 19-30, <<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/42590250?uid=3738776&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21103935553951>> [accessed 8 August 2014], p. 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Blake, *Selected Poems of William Blake*, p. Xxiii.
- <sup>25</sup> Blake, *Selected Poems of William Blake*, p. Xxiii.
- <sup>26</sup> E. P Thompson, *Witness Against The Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), p. 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>28</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>29</sup> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, p. 7.

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- <sup>30</sup> Robert F. Gleckner, 'William Blake and the Human Abstract', *PMLA*, 76.4 (1961) 373 -379 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/460620>>[accessed 10 Aug 2014], p. 374.
- <sup>31</sup> Gleckner, p. 374.
- <sup>32</sup> Gleckner, p. 374.
- <sup>33</sup> Gleckner, p. 374.
- <sup>34</sup> Blake, 'London', *Selected Poems*, p. 56.
- <sup>35</sup> William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Prelude*, ed by J.C Maxwell (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 291 - 293.
- <sup>36</sup> Blake, 'London', *Selected Poems*, p. 56.
- <sup>37</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 291 - 293.
- <sup>38</sup> Benziman, p. 194.
- <sup>39</sup> Peschel, p. 753.
- <sup>40</sup> Blake, 'And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time', *Selected Poems*, p. 71.
- <sup>41</sup> Blake, 'And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time', *Selected Poems*, p. 71.
- <sup>42</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (London: Pearson, 1877), p.10. Internet Archive ebook, <<http://archive.org/details/jerusalememanati00blak>> [accessed 16 August 2014].
- <sup>43</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>44</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>45</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>46</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>47</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>48</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>49</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 26.
- <sup>50</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>51</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>52</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>53</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>54</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>55</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>56</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>57</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', *Selected Poems*, p. 25.
- <sup>58</sup> Peschel, p. 753.
- <sup>59</sup> Josephine A. McQuail, 'Passion and Mysticism in William Blake', *Modern Language Studies*, 30.1 (2000), 121 – 134, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195433>> [accessed 8 June 2014], p. 122.
- <sup>60</sup> Helen C. White, 'The Mysticism of William Blake', (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1927)<<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015012307529;view=1up;seq=6>> [accessed 8 June 2014], p.18.
- <sup>61</sup> William Norman Guthrie, 'William Blake: Mystic. Part II', *The Sewanee Review*, 5.4 (1897) 438-456, <<http://jstor.org/stable/27527952>> [accessed 15 August 2014], p. 448.
- <sup>62</sup> Guthrie, p. 451.
- <sup>63</sup> Peschel, p. 751.

## **Chapter Three: Exploring Didacticism: Gender and Poetry in the Work of Charles and Mary Lamb**

*'The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive.'*<sup>1</sup>

The active, manly little lad, the intellectual and literary boy and the passive and domesticated young lady are three exemplary “little adults” who appear frequently in children’s poetry from the early 1800s. These three characters play the leads in *Poetry for Children*, written by siblings Charles and Mary Lamb in 1809. This didactic collection offers a framework for male and female interactions. The Lambs employ the child’s voice to teach appropriate social conduct and reinforce gender roles and in doing so they reveal their own hopes; a wish to encourage harmony between siblings while calling for a measure of equality.

In proto-feminist work from the same decade equality becomes an emphatic demand. Proto-feminist writers called for revolution by celebrating the strong, intellectual and wise female pedagogue. The work of Utopian poets Charlotte Smith and Anna Laetitia Barbauld embodies this approach. Their writing is discussed in the subsequent chapter.

The poetry which appears in this chapter is both Didactic and Imaginative, emphasising that the history of childhood and poetry is undeniably variegated. Charles Lamb moved in the same circle as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth and like these two writers he valued the imagination. He complained

that boys needed wild and imaginative tales and the didactic texts they were given, written by female pedagogues, placed too great an emphasis on, 'Geography and Natural History'. 'Science has succeeded poetry',<sup>2</sup> protested Lamb, criticising a particular brand of didacticism while he and Mary wrote in a different Didactic mode. In *Poetry for Children* the Lambs use an imaginative form of expression to deliver their lessons in gender and conduct and so there is no clear division between the Didactic and the Imaginative within their work.

This chapter opens with an exploration of the companion poems 'The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin' and 'The Brother's Reply'. These didactic poems encourage equality while simultaneously affirming men's status as the true authorities on language and learning. I discuss how the 'benevolent brother' trope is used in 'The Brother's Reply' to show how brothers may support their sisters' intellectual endeavours at home.

Long-standing assumptions about the competence of women underpin my discussion of Mary Lamb's 'Duty of a Brother', a poem which also calls for brothers to support their sisters with compassion.

To demonstrate how masculinity was 'fashioned' in the early nineteenth century this chapter closes with an analysis of Charles Lamb's 'Going into Breeches'.

## **The Story within the Story; Supportive and Subordinate Siblings within the Family**

Within the Lambs' work the discordant story of gender unfolds with a tangled complexity. Equality is encouraged, but within an androcentric literary framework. This 'Master Narrative' of childhood predominantly features two stereotypical heroes; the young intellectual and the wild, fearless and resilient Romantic boy. Within this narrative certain stereotypes survive as others are rejected.

Donelle R. Ruwe explains that both Lambs seek equality by calling for the recognition 'of women's abilities to write, (and) for an understanding that the gender separations of literary discourse are cultural rather than biological'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, surprisingly, while calling for recognition, the Lambs promulgate the 'Romantic story of the emergent male self'.<sup>4</sup> 'The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin' and its companion poem, 'The Brother's Reply', features a particular species of idealised child; literary, intellectual, benevolent, supportive and male. While the Lambs worked together, these poems also embody a gender compositional divide, with Charles penning 'Reply'. 'The Sister's Expostulation' has long been attributed to Charles, yet, as Cyril Hussey reveals in 'Fresh Light on the Poems of Mary Lamb',<sup>5</sup> the poem was written by Mary.

Out of the pair 'Reply' most strongly employs the important 'benevolent brother' convention. In it Charles inadvertently supports the androcentric literary authority while inviting girls to study Latin, a domain of scholarship then reserved for males. At the time he penned this poem, boys learnt classical languages,

science, mathematics and literature. If fortunate, girls received a basic education in English, History and Geography and if they read poetry it tended to reinforce the attributes of 'good' mothers and sisters. 'Reply' reveals a desire for greater equality in education by showing how a 'benevolent brother' supports his sister to 'negotiate a place within patriarchal structures'.<sup>6</sup> Lamb's moralisms are laudable. However, since the boy's sister relies on his support, Charles confirms that the boy is the dominant literary authority since he has 'control over knowledge of literature, Latin and education'.<sup>7</sup> The sister, under his guidance, is in a subordinate position.

### **A Small Feminine Space**

Two messages are at the heart of Mary's 'The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin,' a poem describing two children's intellectual development. Like Charles she believed a 'benevolent brother' must guide the sister's studies within the domestic realm. The brother ought to encourage his sister's limited independence by creating an intellectual space for her.

In 'Expostulation', the brother pursues knowledge more seriously and has thus outgrown his sister intellectually. His sister resents the time he devotes to study, complaining: 'Shut these odious books up, brother; / They have made you quite another / Thing from what you used to be'.<sup>8</sup> She finds his 'puffed up' intellectualism irritating and grumbles: 'Once you liked to play with me / Now you leave me all alone / and are so conceited grown'.<sup>9</sup> The brother, she protests, is consumed by Latin and will 'scarce look upon any English book'.<sup>10</sup> The sister had

previously enjoyed studying English, with his assistance, but his fascination with Latin, she implies, is unpatriotic. Mary again suggests in 'Duty of a Brother' that English should be sufficient. In 'Duty' the sister urges her brother to 'return to the roof under which they were both born'.<sup>11</sup> Although he may venture to other more exotic, intellectual lands she reminds him that he must not forget the 'Motherland' of England; the feminine country from which 'the same milk ye were both fed'.<sup>12</sup>

The sister's annoyance with her brother's Latin studies mostly arises from a wish for his company. She greatly enjoyed past evenings spent together poring 'over Shakespeare's leaves'.<sup>13</sup> Mary Lamb evokes a scene of quiet cosy domesticity with the two working together as the brother explains 'with ease / the obscurer passages'.<sup>14</sup> Without his stronger and wiser intellect, the sister struggles to understand and appreciate poetry. 'Now you are gone',<sup>15</sup> she laments, 'I must puzzle out alone, / And oft miss the meaning quite, / Wanting you to set me right'.<sup>16</sup> As the patriarchal literary authority the brother is better suited to recognising 'the prettiest places, the poetic turns and graces'.<sup>17</sup> The unfortunate sister relies entirely on his artistic intellect and is upset that he is 'under a new master', both literally and metaphorically.

The sister prefers the known simplicity of her native tongue to Latin and wonders: 'what great charm it is you see / In those words, musa, musæ'.<sup>18</sup> She gives trivial examples of objects she would sacrifice to see him return 'back to English'<sup>19</sup> and to her. These things 'I would give them all with joy', the 'finest

frock, / And my cabinet, and stock / Of new playthings, every toy'.<sup>20</sup> These pretty playthings are symbols of her more frivolous nature.

### **Reinforcing the Literary Patriarchy: The Benevolent Brother Convention**

Didacticism pervades the 'The Brother's Reply' and the poem opens with a scolding. The brother upbraids his sister for her 'foolish under-rating'<sup>21</sup> of his 'first attempts at Latin'. 'Sister, fie, for shame',<sup>22</sup> he chides. 'Give this ignorant babble o'er',<sup>23</sup> asking where is your female pride? The boy believes his sister is capable of learning Latin, albeit with his assistance, and is disappointed with her foolishness. Latin, should be respected says the brother, a commendable wish, but his patronising and paternalistic reprimand hints at other social tenets, echoed in the earlier writings of Rousseau. A lady's 'strength is in her charms', wrote Rousseau, and so she 'ought to make herself pleasing... and not provoke (men) to anger'.<sup>24</sup> The brother, once provoked, puts his sister firmly in her place: 'Know you not each thing we prize / Does from small beginnings rise?'<sup>25</sup> The word order of 'know you not' emphasises the sister's lack of knowledge whilst underlining his superiority. His question carries the manner of a didactic truism imparted by an insightful elder relation, rather than a brother to a sister. Through the brother's rhetorical questioning, Lamb establishes the boy's status as a wiser and more rational creature than his sister. He employs the collective pronoun 'we' with courteous condescension. As the benevolent tutor he explains the challenges of study, lecturing: 'Twas the same thing with your writing / Which you now take such delight in'.<sup>26</sup> The brother details the process of her learning, reminding her:

‘first you learnt the down-stroke line / Then the hair-stroke thin and fine / Then a curve, and then a better / Till you came to form a letter’.<sup>27</sup> He points out her progression from letters to words, a task he likens to his own study. He stresses: ‘my study’s course affords / Little else as yet but words’. However, in time he will learn ‘construction, grammar, style... syntax, and proceed / Classic authors next to read’. Lamb believes in the transformative capability of language explaining that the works of historians, philosophers and poets, ‘Sallust, Phædrus, Ovid, Flaccus’,<sup>28</sup> will make the boy ‘wiser, better’.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, he carefully affirms the brother’s patriotism, explaining that Latin will enhance his understanding of works from the “mother-land”.

Despite the brother’s authority and ‘his important charge’,<sup>30</sup> he must defer to his parents, telling his sister you ‘shall learn Latin with me’<sup>31</sup> with his parents’ agreement. His capitulation to them indicates a respect for authority. It reveals the established family hierarchy and acknowledges the sister’s predicament as the last voice. The brother treasures their relationship, wanting to teach her lest they ‘fall out’<sup>32</sup> but not at the cost of parental approval. Charles Lamb offers what he believes is an exemplary blueprint for sibling interactions and critiques obvious inequality in education. Yet, in so doing, he undoubtedly reinforces the literary patriarchy.

The nature of the Lamb’s work is complicated, as ‘The Sisters’ Expostulation,’ and ‘The Brother’s Reply’ reveals. These poems, along with Mary Lamb’s ‘Duty of a Brother’, conform to long established beliefs about the capability of women, epitomised in the work of Rousseau and John Ruskin:

The search for abstract and speculative truths... for all that tends to wide generalization, is beyond a woman's grasp; their studies should be thoroughly practical.... For the works of genius are beyond her reach.<sup>33</sup>

In 1865 Ruskin, while rejecting the idea of gender superiority, said that a woman's 'intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision'.<sup>34</sup> He explained that men and women's differences complement each other and that women are better able to see 'the qualities of things, their claims, and their places'.<sup>35</sup> A woman's great power, he said, lies in 'Praise'.<sup>36</sup>

At times the Lambs present men as the more intellectually gifted sex who are better equipped to understand and appreciate the 'high art' of poetry. Women, in comparison, are 'milder'<sup>37</sup> and more domestically gifted, as Mary suggests in 'Duty of a Brother'.

Like Ruskin, the Lambs reject the idea of gender superiority as they present the 'strengths' of each sex and, also like Ruskin, women's strengths appear meagre compared with men's. However, in many instances they ostensibly promote equality. When the companion poems 'The Sisters Expostulation' and the 'Brother's Reply' are read together they certainly express a wish for equality, yet they also uphold the patriarchal literary tradition. Ultimately these two poems, along with Mary Lamb's 'Duty of a Brother' seek to provide a template for harmonious male/female relationships. They teach young readers that a benevolent and supportive brother must make time to join his sister in her 'milder province' at home to support her as 'her champion, her adviser'.<sup>38</sup>

## **Defining Gender Roles; Strengths, Duties and Deficiencies**

In 'Duty of a Brother', Mary Lamb's demands for equality are likewise not momentous. Here she attempts to use ancestry and nurturing to erase the sibling's gender differences, stating: 'Under one roof you were both born.../ the same sire gave life to each; / With the same milk ye both were fed'.<sup>39</sup> However, the father is presented as the giver of life with the mother being the nurturer. Despite an attempt at inclusion, these lines put men in a position of power, reinforcing patriarchal hegemony.

At one point Mary adopts a proto-feminist position, urging her brother 'not to join the illiberal crew / in their contempt of female merit'.<sup>40</sup> However, as the poem progresses and the children grow, she delivers a disparaging and timeworn summation of the female character. Her poetic sister is dependent, subservient, weaker and less intelligent than her brother. Her meagre strengths lie in her calm, quiet and 'domestic' temperament. 'Her milder province', she asserts, 'is at home',<sup>41</sup> thus confining women to the domestic sphere. She tells the brother: 'You'll find (your sister) an indoors friend', and with worsening sentiment writes: 'If Nature, who allots our cup / Than her has made you stronger, wiser, / It is that you, as you grow up, / Should be her champion, her adviser'.<sup>42</sup>

Mary's dull sister must care for her 'benevolent brother' in return for his intellectual guidance. The poet speaks to brothers, beseeching them: 'Leave not your sister to another'.<sup>43</sup> She calls for chivalrous and responsible guidance and in return she instructs sisters to offer unfailing support and tolerance: 'It is the law that hand intends...The man the woman still defends / The manly boy the girl

protects'.<sup>44</sup> Mary's poem provides a 'master plan' for male/female relationships and again she echoes Rousseau's sentiment that 'Men and women are and ought to be unlike in constitution and temperament (and so) it follows that their education must be different'.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, Mary argues that men are more able and that the wise management of the sister's studies reflects the natural intelligence of a benevolent brother.

### Constructing Masculinity



Fig. 10.  
*Children's Games by Pieter Bruegel, 1560*  
*The children in the top right hand corner are playing Baste the Bear*

For Charles Lamb masculinity is a construct. In his poem 'Going into Breeches' the clothes literally 'make the man'. 'Breeches' describes the developing masculinity of Phillip, whose manliness is fashioned, mostly, by his clothing. Charles, like Rousseau and Wordsworth, erases feminine beginnings in a story of

developing masculinity yet he is not entirely comfortable with this. As Phillip gets out from 'under the skirt' his new breeches bring him instant manliness but also instant repression. His clothes shackle him to masculine conventions. Although the poem mostly describes the joy of masculinity, this joy is somewhat tempered by a developing responsibility.

Donelle Ruwe explains that Lamb wished to acknowledge that 'brothers are given advantages through artificial means'.<sup>46</sup> She writes: 'both boys and girls are given new clothes as they outgrow the nursery, but only boys are allowed to move beyond skirts into the greater freedom of breeches'.<sup>47</sup> Confusingly, Lamb applauds, and simultaneously rejects, the physical construct of gender. He celebrates Phillip's freedom, stating: 'He can run, or he can ride, / And do twenty things besides, / Which his petticoats forbid'.<sup>48</sup> An extended military metaphor is used to illustrate Phillip's proud 'manliness'. Like an 'Officer on gay parade', or a 'Red-coat in his first cockade',<sup>49</sup> he struts in his new attire and his developing masculinity is associated with physical bravery, duty and honour. Just as the soldier prepares to serve his country, Phillip prepares to take on the responsibility of manhood.

To discover his masculinity and freedom he must erase the feminine influence and cultivate a 'red-blooded' sportive nature which must also be worn with his new clothes. Phillip, like Rousseau's male, finds his 'virtue is in his strength, he pleases because he is strong'.<sup>50</sup> Ruskin too described the virtue of this strength which is 'active, progressive, defensive'.<sup>51</sup> Man, said Ruskin, is

‘eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest’.<sup>52</sup>

Phillip must cultivate these virtues. Lamb asks: ‘Is he not a happy lad?’<sup>53</sup> This question may be read two ways; does Phillip’s freedom bring him happiness? Or, is his ‘freedom’ just another form of bondage like skirts and breeches are? His question causes the reader to hesitate momentarily and ask, ‘is he?’ It lacks the emphatic tone of other statements in the poem.

Phillip is now ‘under other banners’ but does he miss aspects of his early life? ‘He must leave his former manners; / Bid adieu to female games, / And forget their very names’.<sup>54</sup> Lamb uses the commanding verb, ‘must’, to reveal that other forces are in control. He shows that Phillip is not free to do as he chooses and must act in a particular manner. Nonetheless, this new manner should be celebrated as the ‘banner’ acts as a ceremonial reminder of Phillip’s triumphant masculine force. This evokes both a military campaign and a celebration. Girls find an unfortunate ally in ‘punies weak’<sup>55</sup> and ‘the boy’s maturity is also written in slyly sexual language: the boy escapes the feminine “puss” in order to fill out his own breeches’.<sup>56</sup> The reader may wonder, is Phillip happy about this or slightly regretful?

Phillip’s new ‘freedom’ involves launching military-style assaults in games like ‘Baste the Bear’, a game which requires fearlessness as players ‘baste’ a ‘raging bear’. To join in this celebration of manliness, Phillip needs to develop his physical strength and agility as these qualities are fundamental to his gender role.

Additionally, Phillip's strength must extend to the management of his feelings. Childish and emotional behaviour requires the iron-willed command of a valiant man-in-training who 'must have his courage ready, / Keep his voice and visage steady, / Brace his eye-balls stiff as drum, / That a tear may never come'.<sup>57</sup> The drum is a continuation of the military metaphor additionally evoking the 'stiff upper lip' which Phillip needs to keep his emotions in check. The poem reveals that masculinity is a construct but it ultimately reinforces desirable masculine traits. In 'Breeches' Lamb encourages self-sufficiency, resilience and a wild form of masculinity; all exemplary qualities of a Romantic man.

Charles believed great men grew from boys granted imaginative freedom and believed that Natural History texts, by female pedagogues, threatened the imagination, masculinity and intellect of boys. 'Damn them',<sup>58</sup> he writes, 'I mean the cursed Barbauld Crew, those Blights & Blasts of all that is Human in man & child'.<sup>59</sup> Mitzi Myers states that it is 'always assumed that, like Wordsworth, Lamb and Coleridge, any red-blooded youngster prefers fantasy, fairy tales, and sensational chapbooks to stories about everyday life'.<sup>60</sup> This assumption has, even in recent times, led to a preference for 'masculine' Romantic texts and educational approaches. Researchers have contributed to this mindset by viewing historical texts by women writers 'as defective because they don't mythologize the child as men do'.<sup>61</sup>

Donelle Ruwe explains that in the Romantic period 'Poetry as a genre was constructed through the categorization of popular texts as non-poetry (the feminized, the sentimental, the ephemeral) and of high art as real poetry (the

classical, the philosophical, the muscular epic)'.<sup>62</sup> Throughout *Poetry for Children* the 'benevolent brother' trope reinforces this poetic patriarchy and Mary and Charles populate their verse with good, generous and intellectual little men responsibly guiding their sisters' learning. Within this trope, sisters can only carve out small pockets of independence and the Lambs stop 'short of radically subverting these structures or positing an alternative, feminine poetics'.<sup>63</sup>

Not all poets of the period shared these views. The proto-feminist, Charlotte Smith presents an alternative. She exposes the masculine Romantic aesthetic through sibling interactions. In *Conversations Introducing Poetry* she 'not only critiques patriarchy but promotes an enlightened society that supports the aspirations of women'.<sup>64</sup> It is to the poetry and subversive vision of Smith, and her contemporary Anna Laetitia Barbauld, to which I turn in my next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1974), p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> Donelle R. Ruwe, 'Benevolent Brothers and Supervising Mothers: Ideology in the Children's Verses of Mary and Charles Lamb and Charlotte Smith', *Children's Literature*, 25.1 (1997), 87-115, <[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens\\_literature/v025/25.ruwe.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens_literature/v025/25.ruwe.html)> [accessed 6 February 2015], p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Ruwe, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Mitzi Myers, 'De-Romanticizing the Subject: Maria Edgeworth's 'The Bracelets,' Mythologies of Origin, and the Daughter's Coming to Writing', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices* ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Teresa M. Kelley, (Hanover, N.H: University Press of England, 1995), p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Cyril Hussey, 'Fresh Light on the Poems of Mary Lamb' *Supplement to the C.L.S Bulletin*, No. 213, January 1972, p. 1 <[http://www.charleslambociety.com/CLSBulletin\(1935-1972\)/213%20\(Jan.%201972\).pdf](http://www.charleslambociety.com/CLSBulletin(1935-1972)/213%20(Jan.%201972).pdf)> [accessed 10 February 2015].

<sup>6</sup> Ruwe, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Ruwe, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin', *The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University

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- Press, 1908), p. 474, <<https://archive.org/stream/worksinprosevers02lamb#page/n5/mode/2up>> [accessed 14 February 2015].
- <sup>9</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 474.
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 474.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary Lamb, 'Duty of a Brother', *The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb*, p. 442.
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>13</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 474.
- <sup>14</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 474.
- <sup>15</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>16</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>17</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>18</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>19</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>20</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Sister's Expostulation', p. 475.
- <sup>21</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', *The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb*, p. 475.
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 475.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 475.
- <sup>24</sup> Rousseau, p. 322.
- <sup>25</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 475.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 475.
- <sup>27</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 475.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 476.
- <sup>29</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 476.
- <sup>30</sup> Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children* (London: John Van Voorst, 1848), p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 476.
- <sup>32</sup> Charles Lamb, 'The Brother's Reply', p. 476.
- <sup>33</sup> Rousseau, p. 349.
- <sup>34</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens* (New York: Project Bartleby, 2001) Bartleby.com ebook <<http://www.bartleby.com/28/7.html>> [accessed 10 February 2015].
- <sup>35</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens*.
- <sup>36</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens*.
- <sup>37</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>38</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>39</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>40</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>41</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>42</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>43</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>44</sup> Mary Lamb, 'The Duty of a Brother', p. 443.
- <sup>45</sup> Rousseau, p. 326.
- <sup>46</sup> Ruwe, p. 94.
- <sup>47</sup> Ruwe, p. 94.
- <sup>48</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Going Into Breeches', *The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb*, p. 436.
- <sup>49</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Going into Breeches', p. 435.
- <sup>50</sup> Rousseau, p. 322.
- <sup>51</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens*.
- <sup>52</sup> Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens*.
- <sup>53</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Going into Breeches', p. 436.
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- <sup>55</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Going into Breeches', p. 436.  
<sup>56</sup> Ruwe, p. 95.  
<sup>57</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Going into Breeches', p. 436.  
<sup>58</sup> Ruwe, p. 98.  
<sup>59</sup> Ruwe, p. 98.  
<sup>60</sup> Myers, p. 89.  
<sup>61</sup> Myers, p. 89.  
<sup>62</sup> Ruwe, p. 88.  
<sup>63</sup> Ruwe, p. 88.  
<sup>64</sup> Ruwe, p. 90.

## Chapter Four: Women on the Outskirts

The complex history of childhood and poetry is apparent in the work of Charlotte Smith and Anna Laetitia Barbauld who were writing at the turn of the nineteenth century. Their writing is Utopian and often Didactic, seeking to ‘make people better’<sup>1</sup> by providing mothers with examples of how they may educate their children within an everyday setting, as in Barbauld’s *Lessons for Children*.

Smith’s *Conversations Introducing Poetry* is philosophical, exploring theories of gender by bringing women in from the outskirts and overtly calling for equality in education. She shows mothers how to teach girls poetry in the masculine Romantic tradition within an everyday setting. The location of both writers’ work is both logical and practical. Mitzi Myers reminds readers that ‘in everyday life mothers mediate access to oral and written word alike: they are the bearers of language and literature’.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, religion appears in Barbauld’s work, reflecting the cultural values of the time. Both writers, however, jettison the idea of Original Sin by describing the child in the Romantic and Utopian style. Barbauld carries this ideal further, writing in the Transcendental mode in ‘To a Little Invisible Being Who is Soon to Become Visible’. This chapter begins by examining the didactic qualities of each woman’s poetry before turning to these more imaginative and creative strands. The intertwining of the Didactic and the Imaginative in their work reinforces my central contention that these two modes overlap and interconnect, rather than being complete opposites. Likewise, the traditional and the subversive are both juxtaposed and conjoined, with Smith and Barbauld at times reinforcing

the gender stereotype of the nurturing female and at times challenging patriarchal dominance.

Barbauld's *Lessons*, published in 1801, and Smith's *Minor Morals*, published in 1798, explore subjects considered to be the domain of female educationalists. In this era women typically produced texts on Natural History while men wrote on Mathematics and Classical Languages. Smith's *Minor Morals* combines sketches of natural history with everyday lessons on avoiding envy or ridicule. Barbauld likewise set her natural histories and didactic guides within the day to day lives of mothers and children. Her reception speaks for itself; her common sense approach was incredibly popular.

Donelle R. Ruwe explains that women writers of this period focused on social concerns rather than a masculine 'Romantic ideology that privileges aesthetics'.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite both writers' popularity within their era, like many female Didactics, their writing has at times been dismissed as nothing more than charming curios with simple, didactic aims. Until recently, such work has gone unnoticed but increasingly feminist critics and scholars have challenged dualistic perspectives and have championed writers like Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecroft, Mary Shelley and Maria Edgeworth as new Romantic heroines. As the Romantic canon continues to evolve, both Smith and Barbauld have oscillated between the positions of Insider and Outsider. At times the canon has celebrated their work and in other instances their writing has been considered tedious and staid, particularly when it deals with the everyday. Taking issue with the androcentric outlook of Romantic poetry, Ruwe argues that concepts of 'the

maternal, the domestic, the dependent, the emotional, [and] the object'<sup>4</sup> have been defined within a masculine and paternalistic frame. The recent critical discussion of women's texts has revealed, to a greater degree, the authentic voices of women speaking from the outskirts.

### **Charlotte Smith's Feminine Poetics**

Not content with a small feminine space regulated by the masculine literary authority, Smith battled fiercely for a feminine poetics. Her work differed from many female educationalists in that it subverted concepts of femininity. Like Charles and Mary Lamb, she campaigned for equality but put up a much more determined and vigorous fight. She encouraged the formal teaching of poetry to both genders, a practice which was unusual at the time. Rousseau's assumption that 'works of genius remained beyond the reach'<sup>5</sup> of women prevailed and such attitudes barred females' access to the 'high' art of classical and philosophical poetry. Women were thought to be incapable of comprehending 'true' poetry.

Smith rebelled against traditional concepts of femininity, also avoiding stereotypes like the gentle suffering mother. She has been aligned with the Utopian Romantics but her work is also Didactic, once again reinforcing the synergy between these two seemingly opposite poetic modes. In 1804 she published *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, which taught poetic thinking, natural history and morals very differently to the work of more 'conventional' Didactic female writers such as Sarah Trimmer. To illustrate, Smith 'feminised' the teaching of boys in *Conversations*, arguing that 'poetic authority... resides with

the matriarch'.<sup>6</sup> She used 'children's poetry as a vehicle for critiquing the patriarchal ordering of literary and social culture'.<sup>7</sup>

*Conversations* foreshadows Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 epic *Aurora Leigh* in which Browning railed against the deficient education of girls. Her lead character, Aurora, is educated at the hands of a pious and traditional aunt who bombards her with religious works, except for overly passionate ones like St Bonaventure's 'Prick of Love'. Browning satirises this style of education, explaining that the aunt, like Isaac Watts, 'liked instructed piety'.<sup>8</sup> Along with religious catechisms, Aurora learns French, 'kept pure of Balzac and neologism',<sup>9</sup> and music, drawing, dancing, and cross stitch. She learns domestic skills designed to attract and please a husband and 'spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax'<sup>10</sup> which amounts to little more than the ability to 'keep quiet by the fire'<sup>11</sup> and be agreeable.

Ruskin likewise suggested that women's education should be centred around pleasing a husband. He believed that women should be educated in the same subjects as men but 'only so far as may enable [them] to sympathize in [their] husband's pleasure, and those of his best friends'.<sup>12</sup> Smith rebels against these deficient styles of education and she encourages females to enter the masculine intellectual world of 'high' poetry and to actively change it. She achieves this by placing 'brothers and sisters under the supervision of a powerful mother-poet'<sup>13</sup> and in doing so subversively instructs mothers as to how they may teach poetry.

The two children in *Conversations*, George and Emily, receive an equal education under Mrs Talbot who demonstrates ‘the fundamental skills of poetry creation, reading and analysis’<sup>14</sup> while teaching ‘little girls to become poets not in the feminine sentimental mode, but in the classical tradition’.<sup>15</sup> To achieve this Mrs Talbot enlists the help of George, Emily’s brother. Her approach to learning is collective and, in contrast to the Lambs’, George is certainly not the literary authority. The siblings support each other’s poetic development under the ‘poet-mother’s’ expert eye. Initially Emily struggles to remember classical references and grumbles: ‘all these imaginary people are difficult to remember’.<sup>16</sup> Mrs Talbot responds: ‘You cannot, however, understand poetry without knowing the heathen mythology’<sup>17</sup> since ‘there are frequent references to these beings that were once supposed to direct and animate the operations in nature’.<sup>18</sup> Mrs Talbot calls for George’s help because, ‘in the present system of education, boys learn at school the heathen mythology’,<sup>19</sup> whereas girls, like Aurora in the following Victorian period, are instructed in ‘accomplishments such as sewing, watercolouring, and music’.<sup>20</sup> Tradition, for an incredibly long time, barred women from serious intellectual development.

Emily’s intellectual development is fostered in ‘Flora’, the final poem of *Conversations*, co-written by George and his mother. The poem gives Emily the authority ‘to write and read “masculine” texts informed by the classics’.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, it responds to Rousseau’s proposal to use dolls to train women. ‘Flora’ is a poetic doll designed to help Emily ‘expand her knowledge, not her “art of pleasing”’.<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Talbot ‘feminizes’ George, assigning him the task of turning ‘garden plants into dolls and doll dresses’<sup>23</sup> and George helps create a strong

pantheon of fierce female characters to introduce Emily to mythology. Mrs Talbot's 'child-centred' education draws on Emily's love of botany to create characters entirely based on plants. Since Emily's learning is driven by her individual interest, she is able to find meaning in mythology.

In 'Flora', Smith's female flowers are not passive agents resigned to the domestic sphere. She brings them into the world to do battle, chasing,

From vegetable life the insect race...  
For conquest arm'd these pigmy warriors wield  
The thorny lance, and spread the hollow shield  
Of lichen tough.<sup>24</sup>

Smith does not link flowers to a gentle and fragile femininity but instead populates her wild garden with fierce plant-life. Her flowers launch bloody and ruthless attacks as a defence against invading insects:

Fearless the scaled Libellula assail,  
Dart their keen lances at the encroaching Snail,  
Arrest the winged Ant, on pinions light,  
And strike the headlong Beetle in his flight.<sup>25</sup>

Charlotte Smith's powerful 'mother poet', Mrs Talbot, 'encourages girls to arm themselves with knowledge'<sup>26</sup> and additionally reveals Smith's desire for girls to do battle with strength and assertiveness. The text, fundamentally 'teaches mothers not only how to educate their children but also how to educate themselves'.<sup>27</sup> Mrs Talbot is the opposite of Aurora's aunt who encouraged the reading of 'books on womanhood / To prove, if woman do not think at all, / (that)

they may teach thinking'<sup>28</sup> so that they may understand their 'husband's talk / when not too deep, and even of answering / with pretty 'may it please you', or 'so it is''.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Mrs Talbot is a dynamic, inventive, perceptive and intelligent figure and Smith, as a poet, employs her 'to make people better'<sup>30</sup> by fostering equality.

### **Enlightened Domesticity in the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld**

Anna Leticia Barbauld designed her didactic book *Lessons for Children* with the young child in mind. Although it is written in prose, it features here because, like *Conversations*, it is penned by a literary woman who used her knowledge to teach. *Lessons* features a powerful and philosophical mother-teacher a true 'Enlightenment Mother';<sup>31</sup> a strong intellectual and nurturing woman who 'cultures' her children 'in the midst of carrying on her daily chores; (she is) a mother who is an ordinary middle-class woman'<sup>32</sup> but a woman who has transcended domestic submissiveness. She takes charge of her realm as she conjures up a kind of 'enlightened domesticity'<sup>33</sup> and, as William McCarthy demonstrates, she 'takes the preceptorial role assigned by Rousseau to the male'.<sup>34</sup> Barbauld's astute 'Enlightenment Mother', like Smith's Mrs Talbot, functions as an antidote to Rousseau's patriarchal pedagogy.

In *Lessons for Children* Barbauld's domestically minded mother figure guides young Charles through his daily development. She expands his vocabulary while providing simple everyday facts about nature such as: 'Bees make wax and honey'.<sup>35</sup> She provides clear truths of language in short sentences especially

tailored to the very young: 'Letters make syllables. Syllables make words. Several words make a sentence. It is a pleasant thing to read well'.<sup>36</sup> Basic rules appear within her 'chit-chat': 'Come and give mamma three kisses One, two, three. Little Boys must always come when mamma calls them. Blow your nose. Here is a hankerchief'.<sup>37</sup> Her tone is direct and informative as she deals with the everyday realities of child raising.

*Lessons* does not Romanticise or glamourise childrearing and focuses on the daily tasks of caring for children, including, as the above quote demonstrates, such ordinary events as blowing your nose. Far from being a philosophical treatise, it is a factual text, providing the adult reader with a simple method of education to enable the child to become a 'good' person.

Like Smith, Barbauld wrote in a feminine Romantic style and her 1825 poem, 'To an Invisible Being', presents childhood as a time of great potential and innocence. In the poem Barbauld depicts a 'sinless' infant and a domestically minded divine and nurturing mother. Although the poem was written for adults it is discussed here because it joins mother and child to the Utopian and Transcendental vision of the child.

The Transcendental concept of the child appears with the use of the word 'perfection' which is employed to describe the child's natural state. Barbauld's infant, like Wordsworth's Romantic child, is born 'trailing clouds of glory'.<sup>38</sup> The developing foetus is a flawless seed, a 'Germ of new life',<sup>39</sup> full of potential. Barbauld writes: 'heaven lies about us in our infancy' because, like Wordsworth's infant, the child comes 'from God, who is our home'.<sup>40</sup> As a Utopian and

Transcendental figure the little invisible being will require certain conditions to maintain their innocence and achieve their full potential.

The mother, as a vessel for perfection, births her child with the promise of love. The birth is labelled ‘auspicious’, bestowing upon the child a sense of divine mystery and potential with the question: ‘What powers lie folded in thy curious frame?’<sup>41</sup> The infant is full of promise and Barbauld muses: ‘how little canst thou guess thy lofty claim / To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought’.<sup>42</sup> Her divine newborn has the ‘world at their fingertips’ but is not ready to comprehend it as the baby is unable to sense objects and so cannot form thought: ‘Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!’<sup>43</sup> This theory reflects the writings of the eighteenth century philosopher Etienne Bonnot, Abbe de Condillac. Bonnot described the acquisition of knowledge using a statue as a metaphor. As his statue developed it became gradually aware of each sense, especially those which emerged in response to pleasure. This development caused other senses to arise. Similarly, Rousseau wrote: ‘As soon as we become conscious of our sensations we tend to seek or shun the things that cause them, at first because they are pleasant or unpleasant’.<sup>44</sup>

Like Rousseau, Barbauld describes the infant’s development in true Romantic style, with the plant-like foetus growing out of the spring imagery and adhering to the ‘child of nature’ trope:

And see, the genial season’s warmth to share,  
Fresh younglings shoot, and opening roses glow!  
Swarms of new life exulting fill the air,—

Haste, infant bud of being, haste to blow!<sup>45</sup>

Barbauld uses the language of nature to show that the environment will be important in fostering the 'infant bud'. This idea appears in the work of Rousseau and Wordsworth except in Barbauld's writing the infant is nourished and cared for only by women. The anticipation of the baby's arrival is wholly feminine evoking the stereotype of the 'nurturing female'. The father is absent but the mother, the nurses and the matrons eagerly prepare for the baby's arrival. Barbauld writes: 'For thee the nurse prepares her lulling songs, / The eager matrons count the lingering day.'<sup>46</sup> During these preparations a devoted anxiety infuses the mother's love: 'By far the most thy anxious parent longs / On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay'.<sup>47</sup> Through her love and suffering the mother is martyred: 'She only asks to lay her burden down, / That her glad arms that burden may resume'.<sup>48</sup> Her suffering is not just mental but physical as 'nature's sharpest pangs her wishes crown, / (to) free thee living from thy living tomb'. Barbauld's use of the word 'crown' refers to the pain of birth as well as the preciousness of the child. The 'living tomb' highlights the cyclical nature of birth and death, with the mother being the giver of life yet also a potential tomb of flesh. Her longing is constant and divine as she sacrifices herself to nurture her unborn child 'fed with her life through many a tedious moon'.

The poet calls for the child's arrival so that they may 'bask' in the mother's divine love: 'Come, reap thy rich inheritance of love! / Bask in the fondness of a Mother's eye!' Maternal love becomes a longing light, joining the woman to the sun; a traditionally masculine symbol. As the 'sun', the mother

provides the ultimate conditions for growth rather than the masculine authority, as in Rousseau's *Emile*.

When the mother's body becomes a prison Barbauld implores: 'Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!'<sup>49</sup> From there the child's freedom begins, in an acutely Romantic sentiment, with the arrival of nature's light and joy. In lines full of energy and enthusiasm Barbauld urges the infant to 'Launch on the living world, and spring to light!'<sup>50</sup> The natural world is described as a source of abundant joy. She writes: 'Nature for thee displays her various stores, / Opens her thousand inlets of delight'.<sup>51</sup>

The poet evokes the power of poetry, pagan imagery and religion to show that the mother would do anything for anything for her child. Her beads of sweat, from both the exertion of labour and the anxiety surrounding the birth, are linked to rosary beads:

If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,  
With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,  
Anxious I'd bid my beads each passing hour,  
Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay.<sup>52</sup>

This final stanza shows the ultimate sacrifice of the 'divine-mother' through her offering of love, anxiety and pain. Barbauld's work emphatically states that women are the true authority when it comes to writing for and about children since they experience the real aspects of child-raising; the everyday reality of anxiety, sacrifice, love and pain.

Mitzi Myers writes that the real, everyday story of women, childhood, children's literature and poetry has been overshadowed by the Romanticized drama 'of the emergent male self'.<sup>53</sup> The 'metanarrative of childhood',<sup>54</sup> she states, has been rewritten by the Romantic masculine construct of the child; 'a mythologised figure who, until even recently, was the golden boy of critics. This boy, as 'an idealised locus of regressive yearning',<sup>55</sup> reveals the writer's wish for simplicity, communion with nature, strength, wildness, creativity, fearless resilience, self-sufficiency and control. This masculine stereotype is presumed to be preferred by children.

Myers writes that the 'Master Narrative' 'eclipses the girl's growing up and edits out the women who wrote about her'.<sup>56</sup> She provides abundant, and acute, evidence to support this position. However, as I have argued in previous chapters, complexity is the leitmotif of poetic voices from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The history of childhood and poetry is much more complex. Barbauld's popular work is both Didactic and Imaginative. In *Lessons* the mother, as the authority on language and learning, serves as an example for fellow mother-teachers. Barbauld achieves this while also instructing the young and her nurturing lead is intelligent, self-sufficient, strong, resourceful, and imaginative. In 'To a Little Invisible Being', she joins the nurturing self-sacrificing mother to nature as she shows the fearless resilience of women.

Smith too promotes strength and creativity as she presents mothers as the true authorities of learning and language. Through didacticism, and the poetic imagination, she promotes the literary aspirations of women, teaching mothers,

and their daughters, how to become self-sufficient in a masculine world. Both Smith and Barbauld challenge patriarchal dominance as they join the intellectual and the imaginative to everyday realities of caring for children.

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- <sup>1</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'Art and Poetry', *StudiaLogica*, 2.6 (2013) 383 - 384, <[http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina\\_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf](http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf)> [accessed 20 April 2014], p. 381.
- <sup>2</sup> Mitzi Myers, 'Genders, Genres, Generations: Artist-Mothers and the Scripting of Girl's Lives', *NWSA Journal* (1990), 273 - 281 (p. 274).
- <sup>3</sup> Donelle R. Ruwe, 'Benevolent Brothers and Supervising Mothers: Ideology in the Children's Verses of Mary and Charles Lamb and Charlotte Smith', *Children's Literature*, 25.1 (1997), 87-115, <[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens\\_literature/v025/25.ruwe.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens_literature/v025/25.ruwe.html)> [accessed 6 February 2015], p. 88.
- <sup>4</sup> Ruwe, p. 100.
- <sup>5</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1974), p. 349.
- <sup>6</sup> Ruwe, p. 88.
- <sup>7</sup> Ruwe, p. 89.
- <sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, (New York: C.S Frances and Company, 1857), p. 15
- <sup>9</sup> Browning, p. 15.
- <sup>10</sup> Browning, p. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Browning, p. 15.
- <sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II. - Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens* (New York: Project Bartleby, 2001) Bartleby.com ebook <<http://www.bartleby.com/28/7.html>> [accessed 10 February 2015].
- <sup>13</sup> Ruwe, p. 88.
- <sup>14</sup> Ruwe, p. 88.
- <sup>15</sup> Ruwe, p. 89.
- <sup>16</sup> Charlotte Turner Smith, *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1863), p. 165. Google ebook, <<http://books.google.co.nz/books?id=0FJHAAAAYAAJ>> [accessed 8 August 2014].
- <sup>17</sup> Smith, p.165.
- <sup>18</sup> Smith, p.165.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, p.250.
- <sup>20</sup> Ruwe, p. 91.
- <sup>21</sup> Ruwe, p. 106.
- <sup>22</sup> Ruwe, p. 107.
- <sup>23</sup> Ruwe, p. 107.
- <sup>24</sup> Smith, p.226.
- <sup>25</sup> Smith, p.226.
- <sup>26</sup> Ruwe, p. 108.
- <sup>27</sup> Ruwe, p. 108.
- <sup>28</sup> Browning, p.15.
- <sup>29</sup> Browning, p.15.
- <sup>30</sup> Tatarkiewicz, p. 381.
- <sup>31</sup> William McCarthy, 'Mother of All Discourses: Anna Barbauld's Lessons for Children', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 60.2 (1999), p. 206.
- <sup>32</sup> McCarthy, p. 206.
- <sup>33</sup> Sharon Smulders, 'The Good Mother: Language, Gender, and Power in Ann and Jane Taylor's Poetry for Children', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 27.1 (2002), 4-15,

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<[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens\\_literature\\_association\\_quarterly/v027/27.1.smulders.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens_literature_association_quarterly/v027/27.1.smulders.html)> [accessed 23 December 2011], p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> McCarthy, 'Mother of All Discourses', p. 199.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Lessons for Children* (Newark: B. Olds, 1842), p.14

<<https://archive.org/stream/lessonsforchild02letigoog#page/n24/mode/2up>> [accessed 14 February 2015].

<sup>36</sup> Barbauld, *Lessons*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Barbauld, *Lessons*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Ode on Intimations from Recollections of Early Childhood', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. by M.F Libby (Toronto: The Copp, Clark Company, 1892), p. 99. <<https://archive.org/stream/selectpoemsofwil00word#page/2/mode/>> [accessed 7 February, 2015]

<sup>39</sup> Anna Leticia Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected to Soon Become Visible', *Poetry Foundation*, updated 2014 < <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172873>> [accessed 8 August 2014].

<sup>40</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Ode on Intimations from Recollections of Early Childhood', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>42</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>43</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>44</sup> Rousseau, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>46</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>47</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>48</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>49</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>50</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>51</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>52</sup> Barbauld, 'To a Little Invisible Being'.

<sup>53</sup> Mitzi Myers, 'De-Romanticizing the Subject: Maria Edgeworth's 'The Bracelets,' Mythologies of Origin, and the Daughter's Coming to Writing', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices* ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Teresa M. Kelley, (Hanover, N.H: University Press of England, 1995), p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Myers, De-Romanticizing the Subject, p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> Myers, De-Romanticizing the Subject, p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> Myers, De-Romanticizing the Subject, p. 89.

## Chapter Five: William Wordsworth's Transcendental Child

William Wordsworth's work, like Anna Laetitia Barbauld's, is imbued with the perception that childhood is a unique state that must be honoured, treasured and protected. He positioned the child as a Utopian figure by stating: 'The Child is the father of the Man'.<sup>1</sup> He sought to preserve what he saw as the child's natural innocence, authenticity and imagination. Wordsworth's concept of childhood was shaped by the informal style of education seen in *Emile*. His poetry emphasises minimal parental input and, like Jean Jacques Rousseau, he celebrates the Arcadian child 'tutored directly by wild Nature or at most by a 'parent hen''.<sup>2</sup> Most often this child is 'gloriously independent of formal instruction by socializing agents such as actual mothers'.<sup>3</sup> The ideal child remains free from the systematizing forces of society, such as the public school system. While there is an element of 'instructing' in Wordsworth's poetry, ideologically his vision is as far removed from the Didactic as it is possible to get. He writes to inspire his readers to free themselves from the shackles of convention, habit and the mundane in order to reach a place of transcendent individuality.

In *The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet's Mind* the child is a figure of hope and authenticity. The child's unique perspective is fundamental because the adult poet grows out of this view. Within the text childhood and poetry are inextricably combined. *The Prelude* honours the 'spontaneous, unsocialised, egotistical child of nature'<sup>4</sup> and, as in William Blake's work, this self-involvement is not negative as Wordsworth believes humanity carries traces of the divine. In *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* he writes: 'we come / From

God'.<sup>5</sup> The *Immortality Ode* reveals another key philosophy of Wordsworth's; his concept of the Transcendental child. This theory of the child is based on the idea that the child is closer to divinity, both in proximity and nature. He writes: 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting / The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting'.<sup>6</sup> This life's star may dim with age but the adult is able to access this divinity through memory. The combination of adult wisdom with memory helps to make meaning of the initial 'clouds of glory'<sup>7</sup> and the 'Heaven (that) lies about us in our infancy!'<sup>8</sup> God, writes Wordsworth, 'is our home'<sup>9</sup> and his transcendental child seeks to awaken in the reader memories of this home. This chapter explores how Wordsworth's children enable a nostalgic return to the wisdom of youth. He employs the natural child trope to convey this wisdom. However, at times this visionary character is destined to perish. Their passing reinforces their chosen status as they become absorbed by their natural surrounds.

### **Joy in Embers: Nostalgia's Recovery of the Visionary Gleam**

Wordsworth's concept of the child forms part of a holistic view of the individual. In the *Immortality Ode* he celebrates the whole person by reaffirming their original divinity as well as their learned wisdom. Galia Benziman explains that Wordsworth, like Blake, imagines childhood as 'both morally superior and artistically productive'.<sup>10</sup> However, both writers also privilege the authentic whole self and their work champions the individual as part of a realisation of the 'human form divine'.<sup>11</sup> Divinity, insists Wordsworth, is less obscured in youth and his work draws on the nostalgic and flexible imagination to revisit the divine,

innocent and honest state of childhood. Nostalgia is the driving force which activates memory, emotion and mature thought. It is a feeling which helps bring Wordsworth closer to 'God, who is our home'.<sup>12</sup> The word nostalgia originates from the Greek *nostos*, meaning to return home. Laurence Goldstein explains that 'by reflection or involuntary stimulus the adult can travel back to the sources of power'.<sup>13</sup> Nostalgia enables Wordsworth to rediscover the trail of glory; a trail which almost disappears amidst the 'dialogues of business, love, or strife'.<sup>14</sup> The poet draws strength from the imaginative return to a glorious youth. He also takes comfort in the 'primal sympathy'<sup>15</sup> and 'philosophic mind'<sup>16</sup> which can only come with age.

Fred Hoerner explains that 'in high Romantic fashion, the poet assumes that "thought" screens the speaker from the longed-for immediacy of the visionary child'.<sup>17</sup> Hoerner's theory implies that it is the reader, rather than the Imaginative poet, who feels cut off from the trails of glory. In the *Immortality Ode* the nostalgic, imaginative and reflective poet is able to break through the distance.

The *Immortality Ode* reveals that all stages of life are of paramount importance to the whole individual, even though the speaker initially swings between nostalgic grief and nostalgic hope. In the final stanzas the poet finds stability through maturity, wisdom and the imagination. While nostalgia keeps 'the Golden Age within reach',<sup>18</sup> it is not a central theme of the *Immortality Ode*. Hoerner affirms that Wordsworth's 'poetic framework... is too dialectical to let nostalgia have the last or even the mediate word'.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately it makes childhood accessible so that a philosophical conversation can begin. The learned adult mind

creates meaning by reaching back to the divine source which lingers in childhood. Memory joins the days of the child and the adult 'each to each in natural piety'<sup>20</sup> and both adult and child form 'the human heart by which we live'.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Immortality Ode*, the 'years that bring the philosophic mind',<sup>22</sup> and the poetic imagination, merge with the re-accessed glory of childhood to create 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.<sup>23</sup> This integrated view brings an adult realisation of the 'human form divine'.<sup>24</sup>

Wordsworth's respect for the whole individual is further demonstrated by his use of the child's voice. Attempts at an authentic child's voice did not often feature in eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry, other than in Blake's work. Although the child does not speak in the *Immortality Ode*, a key poetic philosophy is revealed; the child's perspective provides 'the fountain-light of all our day'<sup>25</sup> as they are closer to the 'immortal sea'<sup>26</sup> and bright radiance of God's glory. This philosophy informs Wordsworth's 'child-speak', resulting in a common criticism; instead of hearing the authentic voice of the child, readers have frequently sensed a nostalgia for a simpler, more joyful, and more genuine, existence. The voice of Wordsworth's 'natural' child appears unnatural and his children's voices are perceived as simplified and 'counterfeit'. His regressive nostalgic view defines the child as pure, free and authentic and social structures, like the city, lack these qualities. From this perspective, the natural child is a nostalgic and Arcadian 'other'. They roam unfettered within nature's 'beauteous forms'<sup>27</sup> but they are also trapped within this landscape. Wordsworth's children, as well as his peasant characters, do have much in common with their surroundings. They are untamed,

uncorrupted and honest and Wordsworth does appear to speak through them like a 'ventriloquist',<sup>28</sup> to borrow a phrase from Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

However, Wordsworth's nostalgic ventriloquism is not a negative regression. In 'Letter to Mathetes' he shows that if Mathetes 'cannot recall past time...he cannot begin his journey afresh'.<sup>29</sup> He needs 'the sacred light of childhood',<sup>30</sup> because without it childhood is 'no more than a remembrance'.<sup>31</sup> Wordsworth's nostalgia for childhood brought him pleasure and inspiration by enabling him to return to his divine and poetic 'home'. However, his 'child-speak' does not always 'ring true'. He tries 'to recollect "The fullness of...bliss" that encroaching thought presumably taints'<sup>32</sup> but, like Blake, his mature emotion and adult philosophies break through. Paradoxically, the child's voice becomes at times less authentic as Wordsworth uses it to break the distance between youth and age.

### **The Wisdom of the Child**

Wordsworth gives power to the child. In *The Prelude* he writes: 'our simple childhood, sits upon a throne / that hath more power than all the elements'.<sup>33</sup> The child is powerful because psychologically they create the adult and spiritually they are closer to God. Wordsworth's powerful child characters are often natives of the idyllic 'outskirts'; they are special and 'chosen' individuals, able to transcend society's equalising influence. In contrast, unfortunately, transcendence is impossible for the adult who is unable to appreciate the child's innocent and divine perspective. In the *Immortality Ode* Wordsworth mourns the child's special

way of seeing. He writes: 'The things which I have seen now I can see no more'.<sup>34</sup> As an adult he finds himself split from 'the glory and the dream'<sup>35</sup> of youth. 'There hath pass'd away a glory from the earth',<sup>36</sup> he writes, feeling the loss of his joyful boyhood spent in nature. All that remains is childhood's 'visionary gleam'<sup>37</sup> preserved in memory. Through poetry Wordsworth sought to remind the reader of the divine gleam of youth.

In *The Prelude* the Boy of Winander is joined with the wisdom of nature. He moves alone 'along the edges of hills'<sup>38</sup> at sunrise, evoking Christ's resurrection, and sunset, foreshadowing his own divine death. Whether he is 'beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake'<sup>39</sup> the boy has his 'hands pressed closely palm to palm',<sup>40</sup> in a gesture that evokes prayer, thereby linking him to the divine. The boy calls through his hands 'to the silent owls' and his call is so convincing that they answer him: 'They would shout / across the watery vale, and shout again, / responsive to his call, with quivering peals'.<sup>41</sup> Their calls gather in a wild joyful intensity as they recognise a nature in harmony with their own. The owl is the emblem of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, inspiration, the arts and literature. By aligning the boy with Athena, Wordsworth grants him the power of wisdom and divine inspiration.

During the times when the owls do not respond, the boy listens instead to the silence and is able to hear 'the voice / Of mountain torrents'.<sup>42</sup> Nature speaks to the boy through the owls and the water. Mountains are often considered holy places, or dwellings of a divine being. When the mountain pours forth an audible torrent the boy experiences 'a gentle shock of mild surprise'.<sup>43</sup> He is being granted

access to nature's divine voice. At other times the 'solemn imagery' of nature enters the boy's mind. The symbols present in the section on the Boy of Winander cement his divinity and authority as 'Nature's Priest'.<sup>44</sup> However, the boy must 'die to retain (his) natural "eternality"'.<sup>45</sup> He never has the chance to lose sight of his glorious nature. Age will not split him from his own his divinity and although he loses his life, transcendence for him remains an ongoing possibility.

In 'We Are Seven' an unimaginative and teacherly adult character is a foil for Wordsworth's transcendental and visionary child. As a conversation unfolds between the pair, the 'simple child' is revealed as wiser than the adult who is unable to understand, or relate to, the child's perspective. Like Blake, Wordsworth shunned the heavy handed morality of didactic texts. In 'We Are Seven' he parodies the catechistic method of works like *Divine Songs*, preferring instead the 'things that teach as Nature teaches'.<sup>46</sup> Wordsworth echoes the catechetical method as his incredulous questioner endeavours to make plain the grim permanence of death. The adult asks the little girl about her siblings:

"How many are you then," said I,

"If they two are in heaven?"

The little Maiden did reply,

"O Master! we are seven."<sup>47</sup>

The girl does not think her siblings are gone despite the gentleman's attempts to show her otherwise. At eight years old what should she 'know of death?'<sup>48</sup>

Despite the passing of her siblings, the little girl's innocence stays a brutal pang.

The experienced adult, with his harsh facts, is a figure not to be trusted because he

is split from his own original divinity. He hails from the continually advancing city and his questions seek to hasten the girls' path to experience, which leads to the pain of grief. The gentleman's wish to force reality into imagination can be seen as a type of levelling, a 'killing of the child-mind'<sup>49</sup> which Blake also rejected.

Wordsworth's Transcendental child has her head up in the 'clouds of glory' and the gentleman wishes to bring her down and 'set her straight'. However, the child's innocence prevails and instead the girl becomes the 'mother to the man', or the reader, as Wordsworth hopes. Wordsworth wishes to grant the reader insight to 'make them better'. Without nostalgic and imaginative access to the child's perspective, childhood becomes the unattainable path to transcendence. This 'little cottage girl' is a manifestation of the 'divine' and the perplexed narrator is blind to this as he has unknowingly been oppressed. Wordsworth, like Blake, rejected systems that repressed the individual, including the city. The gentleman symbolises systematisation and the voracious levelling city described in *The Prelude* reminds the reader of Blake:

One vast mill  
Men, Women, three-years' children, Babes in arms.  
Oh blank confusion! true epitome  
Of what the mighty city is herself  
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,  
Living amid the same perpetual whirl  
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced

To one identity, by differences  
That have no law, no meaning and no end –  
Oppression, under which even highest minds  
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.<sup>50</sup>

The misguided adult of 'We are Seven' wants to bring the girl in line with his point of view in a similar style that 'melts' and 'reduces' to 'one identity'. His persistent and repetitive inquiries threaten to stain the child's simple innocence. He does not succeed and the naive child remains free from oppression. Except there is no permanent 'happily ever after' here because childhood is an impermanent state. The little girl of 'We are Seven' will grow to understand loss, unless she succumbs to the same fate as her siblings. Growth is a problematic affair for the Transcendental child.

### **Happily Ever After; Wordsworth's Chosen Children Return Home**

In 'Lucy Gray; or Solitude' Wordsworth's divine child of nature achieves permanence and her innocence is preserved, in death. The poem tragically idealises the 'child of the earth' as it explores parental inattention. Lucy Gray, like the Boy of Winander, is more like a wild plant than Rousseau's carefully tended Emile and her death occurs because Nature is a poor substitute for a parent. There is no watchful figure to impart a sense of safety as in 'We are Seven'. In 'Lucy Gray' nature becomes 'a ground that might reabsorb the child figured against it'.<sup>51</sup> This, says Alan Richardson, demonstrates the child's 'chosen' state. Lucy is described as a rare but sweet creature, one who is 'not blither is the mountain

roe'.<sup>52</sup> Her existence is the stuff of fable with the poet himself declaring: 'Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray'.<sup>53</sup> Appearances of her seem uncommon and when he catches a glimpse of her on the dramatic landscape of the moor he writes: 'When I crossed the wild, / I chanced to see at the break of day / the solitary child'.<sup>54</sup> The word 'chanced' implies good fortune with the poet spotting the creature of myth.

At certain points in the poem Lucy is described in negatives, reinforcing her tenuous hold on the world. In the first instance Wordsworth sets up Lucy as a friendless and neglected child. He writes: 'no mate, no comrade Lucy knew'<sup>55</sup> and when she disappears Wordsworth laments: 'the sweet face of Lucy Gray / will never more be seen'.<sup>56</sup> The use of negatives reinforces Lucy's parents' failure to protect her fabled sweetness and to provide her with company.

The alternate title of the poem, 'Solitude', combined with the subject matter, conveys the loss that isolation may bring. In the poem Lucy not only loses her life, her 'wretched parents'<sup>57</sup> also lose their 'sweet' daughter. The 'lonesome wild'<sup>58</sup> claims her and she truly becomes the child of legend with some maintaining 'that to this day / she is a living child' as 'O'er rough and smooth she trips along, / And never looks behind, And sings a solitary song'<sup>59</sup> which nobody hears because she 'whistles in the wind'.<sup>60</sup> *The Prelude*, at times, portrays a different and more positive kind of solitude, although it is still tinged with some element of danger. The poem describes the blissful, and at times terrifying, wanderings of solitary youth. Wordsworth writes: I grew up / fostered alike by beauty and by fear... we were let loose / For sports of wider range... 'twas my joy... to range the open heights where woodcocks ran / Among the smooth green

turf. Through half the night'.<sup>61</sup> Like 'Lucy Gray' no watchful or instructive adult looks after the child but this is not problematic. Instead nature takes care of the child offering them a wild education springing from natural associations.

No stern moralist appears when a boat is stolen in *The Prelude*. Instead a 'peak, black and huge... Upreared its head... the grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars, with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing, / Strode after me'.<sup>62</sup> The image functions as a 'natural' form of behaviour management and it continues to haunt the child.

Galia Benziman explains that a child raised solely by nature is a child neglected and that the 'natural' child trope did not completely satisfy Wordsworth. She proposes that the natural child metaphor grew out of a painful yearning for his deceased mother. This is very plausible, yet nature is depicted in contradictory terms, sometimes it is a positive and enlightening force and at other times it is negative, isolating and neglectful. Richardson discusses this contradictory portrayal of nature. He notes that in *The Exclusion* 'harsh depictions of the rural beggar child reared by "savage Nature"'<sup>63</sup> suggest a growing discomfort with the 'appeal to nature in the face of an increasingly mechanised and commercialised society'.<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth's 'power struggle' between the figure of the natural child and socialised adult is in conflict when education becomes a threat. Wordsworth devoted a chapter of *The Prelude* to books, the very stuff of learning and even enlightenment.

He wrote:

The consecrated words of Bard and Sage,  
Sensuous or intellectual, wrought by men...Me hath such strong  
entrancement overcome,  
When I have held a volume in my hand,  
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,  
Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine!<sup>65</sup>

In contrast, the uneducated labourer of *The Prelude*, a happily ‘whistling ploughboy’ is blissfully ignorant but also impaired. Wordsworth describes the boy’s eyes as ‘sluggish blank, and ignorant and strange --/ proclaiming boldly that they never drew / A look or motion of intelligence’<sup>66</sup> from reading. His soul, says Wordsworth, is sleeping. The ploughboy’s dormancy interrupts Wordsworth’s idyllic reverie, implying here nature alone is not enough. A child of nature can be ‘like a caterpillar sheathed in ice’<sup>67</sup> but at other times the cultured child might find that knowledge may also be ‘purchased by the loss of power’.<sup>68</sup> Wordsworth’s children, as they grow, enter a complicated world fraught with obstacles.

Ultimately, as ‘We are Seven’ reveals, the adult presence is needed to care for the natural child. Benziman argues that without this watchful figure all Wordsworth’s child characters would face neglect. ‘We are Seven’ avoids the trap of neglect whilst presenting the Transcendental version of the child. As the poem progresses it is apparent that the ‘little Maid’ has not been educated entirely by nature as she has, as Richardson points out, ‘received some measure of religious instruction (“Till God released her of her pain”)<sup>69</sup>. This religious knowledge adds

to the girl's divine perspective, which appears in contrast to the adult, who has lost touch with his original source of divinity. The 'fallen' adult has forgotten his own true nature and this, implies Wordsworth, is the ultimate neglect.

Wordsworth's work presents a struggle between the divine individual and the systematising forces of the city, an organism made up of heaving confusion. It is 'one vast mill'<sup>70</sup> of humanity 'melted and reduced / to one identity'.<sup>71</sup> His Transcendental child is free from the influence of a levelling society and, like Rousseau, Wordsworth leaves childhood to ripen in his characters. Benziman states that Wordsworth's individual child 'is given full expression and a distinct status, not as a mistreated and misunderstood other but as the core of the poet's own self – remembered, introspected, and imagined at the same time'.<sup>72</sup> It is through nostalgia that Wordsworth is able to re-imagine the glory of youth to fully realise, and honour, the human condition in all its splendour. As Goldstein writes: 'what seems to be a regression is actually a gathering of energy from an original source'<sup>73</sup> and this gathering of energy occurs as part of a celebration of the individual.

Like all of the poets featured in this thesis Wordsworth writes to effect change. Though his Utopian vision he seeks to remind the reader of a divine ancestor; their original true self. This young self carries a natural wisdom and so may teach the adult about freedom, innocence and their own individual divinity. Wordsworth's poetry is undeniably of the Blue Box style in that it is Utopian, Transcendental and Imaginative. However, by hoping to teach, and thereby improve, his adult readers, Wordsworth borrows from the Green Box, using an element of instruction to help the reader transcend a corrupt and divided society;

'one vast mill'<sup>74</sup> made up of those expelled from the Arcadian garden of childhood.

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- <sup>2</sup> William McCarthy, 'Mother of All Discourses: Anna Barbauld's Lessons for Children', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 60.2 (1999), p. 199.
- <sup>3</sup> McCarthy, 'Mother of All Discourses', p. 199.
- <sup>4</sup> Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice 1780-1832* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>6</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>7</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>8</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>9</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>10</sup> Galia Benziman, 'Two Patterns of Child Neglect: Blake and Wordsworth', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 5.2 (2007), 167 - 197 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> [accessed 6 June 2014], p. 168.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert F. Gleckner, 'William Blake and the Human Abstract', *PMLA*, 76.4 (1961) 373 -379 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/460620>> [accessed 10 Aug 2014], p. 374.
- <sup>12</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations', *Select Poems*, p. 99.
- <sup>13</sup> Laurence Goldstein, 'The Auburn Syndrome: Change and Loss in "The Deserted Village" and Wordsworth's Grasmere', *ELH*, 40 (1973) 352-371 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872679>> [accessed 26 October 2014]. p. 353
- <sup>14</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 100.
- <sup>15</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 103.
- <sup>16</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 103.
- <sup>17</sup> Fred Hoerner, 'Nostalgia's Freight in Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"', *ELH*, 62 (1995), 631 - 661, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030094>> [accessed 26 October 2014]. p. 634.
- <sup>18</sup> Goldstein, p. 353.
- <sup>19</sup> Hoerner, p. 632.
- <sup>20</sup> Wordsworth, *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 7.
- <sup>21</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 103.
- <sup>22</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 103.
- <sup>23</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 103.
- <sup>24</sup> Gleckner, p. 374.
- <sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 102.
- <sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 102.
- <sup>27</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, ed. by William Richey and Daniel Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p. 104.
- <sup>28</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2012), Amazon.com ebook.
- <sup>29</sup> Goldstein, p. 352 - 353
- <sup>30</sup> Goldstein, p. 352 - 353
- <sup>31</sup> Goldstein, p. 352 - 353
- <sup>32</sup> Hoerner, p. 634.
- <sup>33</sup> William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Prelude*, ed by J.C Maxwell (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 197.
- <sup>34</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 97.

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- <sup>35</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>36</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 97.
- <sup>37</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 199.
- <sup>38</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 189.
- <sup>39</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 191.
- <sup>40</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 191.
- <sup>41</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 191.
- <sup>42</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 191.
- <sup>43</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 191.
- <sup>44</sup> Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 99.
- <sup>45</sup> Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism*, p. 18.
- <sup>46</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 181.
- <sup>47</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, p. 71.
- <sup>48</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, p. 70.
- <sup>49</sup> V. de S. Pinto, 'Isaac Watts and William Blake', *The Review of English Studies*, 20.79 (1944), 214 - 223, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/509102>> [accessed 8 August 2014], p. 221.
- <sup>50</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 291 - 293.
- <sup>51</sup> Richardson, p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 37.
- <sup>53</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 36.
- <sup>54</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 36.
- <sup>55</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 36.
- <sup>56</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 36.
- <sup>57</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 36.
- <sup>58</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 38.
- <sup>59</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 38.
- <sup>60</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lucy Gray', *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 38.
- <sup>61</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 51.
- <sup>62</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 57.
- <sup>63</sup> Richardson, p. 20.
- <sup>64</sup> Richardson, p. 20.
- <sup>65</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 171 - 177
- <sup>66</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 410.
- <sup>67</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1835), <<https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=qTRYAAAACAAJ&pg=PA325&lpg=PA325&dq=like+a+caterpillar+sheathed+in+ice&source=bl&ots=x5fPCCsoMu&sig=9wqGvDMPCx3wv6uRaZVt53W9o4o&hl=en&sa=X&ei=YUDiVPfpKYn58QWQu4LgDw&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=like%20a%20caterpillar%20sheathed%20in%20ice&f=false>> [accessed 10 February 2015 ], p. 325.
- <sup>68</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 193.
- <sup>69</sup> Richardson, p. 71.
- <sup>70</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 291 - 293.
- <sup>71</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 291 - 293.
- <sup>72</sup> Benziman, p. 178.
- <sup>73</sup> Goldstein, p. 352
- <sup>74</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, p. 291 - 293.

## Chapter Six: Organised Fun: The Nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll



Fig. 11.

In the Victorian period the celebration of the individual continued in the work of Edward Lear. His nonsense heroes and heroines are non-conformists and, as in the poetry of his contemporary Lewis Carroll, often charming eccentrics. Lear and Carroll's popular writing for children shows that as the nineteenth century progressed there was a shift in focus from education to pleasure. Norejane Hendrickson and Nancy Coghill state that Victorian children's poetry was created 'for pleasure and imagination'<sup>1</sup> although frequently still 'for guidance, for moral enlightenment, (and) for socialization'.<sup>2</sup> Didactic texts remained popular, but as the century progressed, fun and imagination became more fashionable with 'humor, limericks and jingles, and poems about holidays'<sup>3</sup> becoming increasingly in demand. In contrast to Wordsworth's poetry, which has an underlying aim to improve and liberate readers in order to make them more transcendent, Lear and Carroll write more purely to entertain.

Charles Kingsley's 1863 novel *The Water Babies*, is often considered 'the first book of the first golden age'.<sup>4</sup> It came at a time, says Peter Hunt, 'when children's imaginations were liberated'.<sup>5</sup> However, I contend that this liberation began much earlier, as Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* demonstrates. Published in 1846, the book arrived at a time when 'fun' was in vogue. P.H. Muir affirms that 'the period when children were allowed to use imagination and to read for pleasure began in 1840'.<sup>6</sup> Muir's findings, and the popularity of Lear's nonsense verse, shows that the 'golden age' was in its infancy around 1840, with Kingsley's pivotal text cementing its arrival.

In 1865 Lewis Carroll published his much loved and influential work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, following in 1871. Both texts have been considered 'turning points in children's literature and Carroll regarded as the greatest writer from the golden age'.<sup>7</sup>

The literary poster child of the mid-1800s was imaginative and fun-loving and Lear and Carroll wrote with this child in mind. Delight was their primary aim and they achieved this through a rigid system of organised fun. Nonsense writing had a joyful new audience in mind and the 'innocent' star of Romanticism took a backseat.

## The Star of the ‘Golden Age’

Both Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll wrote solely for the amusement of children. They did not write for adult instructors and most often they had specific children in mind. *Alice in Wonderland* was written for Alice Liddell, Carroll’s ‘most-loved child-friend’,<sup>8</sup> and Lear created *The Owl and The Pussycat* for the children of Edward Stanley, the Earl of Derby, his close friend and benefactor.

Lear’s own values do occasionally surface in his verse in a mildly didactic style. In some instances, he applauds generosity and in others he makes a greedy character pay, but, for the most part, he champions the imaginative and daring nonconformist. His nonsense verse sympathises with young readers rather than trying to improve them. Lear achieves this by acknowledging that language can be confusing and absurd. His verse resonates with young children because it hones in on the oddities. Homonyms and puns are the staples of nonsense and readers must be ‘in’ on the joke to appreciate the absurdity. However, those who are newly initiated are more likely to appreciate the fun.

In my own experience as a teacher I have noticed the ongoing appeal of Lear and Carroll’s nonsense, particularly amongst seven to ten year olds. At this age children are grappling with the quirks of the English language. Like many developing writers, my former class of seven and eight year olds often muddled their homonyms. As a result, they found misused homonyms hilarious and loved creating ‘silly’ and baffling ‘Homonym Letters’. Many playful, and absurd, messages were swapped in that classroom. ‘English is weird!’ yelled one perplexed seven year old after a discussion about the spelling of ‘tail’ and ‘tale’,

and ‘which’ and ‘witch’. His classmates nodded in agreement. Unsurprisingly, they found *Alice* hilarious. These kids got the joke, very recently, and they were thrilled.

“Mine is a long sad tale,” said the Mouse, turning to Alice and sighing. “It is a long tail certainly,” said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail ; “but why do you call it sad? . . . “I beg your pardon,” said Alice very humbly, you had got to the fifth bend, I think?” “I had *not*,” cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily. “A knot!” said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her. “O do let me help you undo it.”<sup>9</sup>

In her article ‘The Language of Nonsense in Alice’, Jacqueline Flescher reveals that most ‘children over thirteen find the *Alice* books both “unrealistic” and “stupid”’.<sup>10</sup> However, one 12 year old, from the minority who enjoyed it, had this to say: “The words are silly but not stupid: they are ridiculous in a way that I like”.<sup>11</sup> ‘Silly’ words, like misused homonyms and puns, pop up all over the place in *Alice*. This survey, combined with my own observations as a teacher, shows that *Alice* appeals to younger children. K. Narayan Kutty explains that the children Carroll ‘knew best and adored belonged to the 8-11 age group’<sup>12</sup> which partly explains the tastes of the older children. To the young, nonsense is sympathetic. Language is slippery, it says, and words can be frustrating, absurd and confusing. Lear and Carroll’s writing shows a warm-hearted sensitivity towards their audience. They contain the uncertainty of language within the safety net of order and the reliable structure of rhythm and rhyme consoles as it cheers.

## A System of Fun

The content of nonsense poetry, in comparison with the didactic poetry discussed so far, appears more inventive and frequently random. However, nonsense is also highly structured. Original, imaginative and unpredictable characters operate within a strict pattern of predictable and regular metrics. Tension arises between the disorder of the content and the order of a formulaic structure. 'Nonsense bears the stamp of paradox',<sup>13</sup> explains Jacqueline Flescher, and this is what makes it amusing. To illustrate, in Edward Lear's limericks, bizarre characters create disorder within a tight framework of structural rules. The first line of each limerick is reliably predictable, often adhering to the following formula: There was a young man, or lady, or person etc, hailing from town X or Y. From there the following line rhymes with the first and last lines. The third and fourth lines rhyme with each other. The syllable count is regular and is most often 9 / 9 / 6 / 6 / 9. In 'There was a Young Person of Smyrna' Lear adheres to most of the above principles:

There was a Young Person of Smyrna,  
Whose Grandmother threatened to burn her;  
But she seized on the cat,  
And said, "Granny, burn that!  
You incongruous Old Woman of Smyrna!"<sup>14</sup>

The bizarre content of the poem, the threat to burn the child, and the child's suggestion to burn the cat, contrasts with the more serious structural rules. The joke is created by 'the paradox'. Lear's disordered characters regularly meet an

unfortunate end. A man who dances ‘absurdly’ with a bird gets smashed in ‘There was an Old Man of Whitehaven.’ In ‘There was an Old Person of Cromer’ the protagonist jumps off a cliff. A man dies of despair in ‘There was an Old Man of Cape Horn’ and the lead of ‘There was an Old Man of the Cape’ is burned alive by an ape. In each of the above limericks the violence is softened by the final line. Lear never brings in a surprising last line, says John Reider. Whether the odd characters jump off cliffs, die of despair, get smashed or burned alive, ‘the need to control such threatening possibilities may help to explain the curious restraint of Lear’s formal handling of the final rhyme’.<sup>15</sup> Predictability softens the ‘threatening possibilities’ and the formalities of nonsense create a safety net.

This safety net of rhythm and rhyme, says Flescher, is the ‘very stuff of nonsense’.<sup>16</sup> Rhythm occurs as part of the serial progression and alliteration depends upon repetitive progression. Flescher explains how ‘an ordered system of language can by and large take two forms: inner relationship or serial progression (alphabet, declension, etc.)’.<sup>17</sup> Nonsense relies on the latter. For example, in Carroll’s ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ rhythm and alliteration ‘contribute to a sharply defined order’.<sup>18</sup> The poem is written in impeccably regular metre, providing a contrasting framework for the nonsense. There are 18 stanzas following the pattern 8 / 6 / 8 / 6 / 8 / 6 and with the meter ‘so sharply defined, shoes, ships and sealing-wax can co-exist happily, and cabbages and kings live side by side’.<sup>19</sup>

In the following stanza the alliteration in the 3rd and 4th lines emphasises the already stressed syllables:

The time has come, the walrus said,  
To talk of many things,  
Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax,  
Of cabbages and kings,  
And why the sea is boiling hot,  
And whether pigs have wings.<sup>20</sup>

In the 3rd line the stressed syllable within each iambic foot contains the same onset sound; 'Of **sh**oes and **sh**ips and sealing-wax'.<sup>21</sup> The iambic feet are clearly defined, rhythmically, by the alliteration. Use of a different device would have resulted in less successful nonsense. Flescher explains that 'had Carroll exploited assonance, with emphasis on vowels, he would have weakened the function of the serial order'.<sup>22</sup> The pattern, she states, 'makes verse a suitable vehicle for nonsense'.<sup>23</sup> Within this tight framework much 'fun' can be had. The duping of the naive little oysters echoes the artificial safety of the reassuring rhythm. They are lulled into a false sense of security. The reader spots the clue to their unfortunate end:

'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,  
'Is what we chiefly need:  
Pepper and vinegar besides  
Are very good indeed --'<sup>24</sup>

The viciously funny demise of the fat and friendly oysters occurs within the serious frame of metre.

Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' is another poem with great bones. Each stanza consists of 4 even lines following the 8 / 8 / 8 / 6 pattern.

'Jabberwocky' is symmetrical, featuring repetition at either end. Carroll's choice of device strengthens the rhythm. Alliteration, assonance and partial rhymes attract attention to all the right places. 'Jabberwocky' may have a regular structure but its content baffles. "It seems very pretty,"<sup>25</sup> says Alice, "but it's *rather* hard to understand!"<sup>26</sup> Alice initially thinks 'Jabberwocky' is written in another language, until she reads it with a mirror. She exclaims: "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas - only I don't exactly know what they are!"<sup>27</sup> She does not trust the language in front of her. She knows the subject is frightening because, '*somebody* killed *something*',<sup>28</sup> yet she does not know the full story.

The nonsense of the 'Jabberwocky' comes from the confusion of words. Slythy, explains Carroll, is a combination of slimy and lithe.<sup>29</sup> The individual words often make sense because of the known words surrounding them. In the first and final stanzas of 'Jabberwocky' this is merely conjunctions, prepositions and a sparse scatter of verbs. 'Jabberwocky' is an example of a poem in which the gruesome content manages to spill out of its strictly formed boundaries, creating confusion and alarm. Its flurry of action and the confusion of words adds to the grisly scene. In the fifth stanza the action comes to a gory climax as the hero repeatedly stabs the fearsome Jabberwock. 'One, two! One, two! And through and

through',<sup>30</sup> writes Carroll, as the 'vorpal blade'<sup>31</sup> goes 'snicker snack',<sup>32</sup> slicing through the Jabberwock's neck.

This tightly made poem aims to thrill rather than educate the reader. Its spine-tingling creatures, the 'Jubjub bird', the 'frumious Bandersnatch' and the 'outgrabbing' 'Mome raths', are all created with excitement in mind. The structure of the poem makes it particularly memorable, surviving as 'a constant furniture for the minds of children',<sup>33</sup> haunting their memories with frightening fun and giving them 'something to think upon when alone'.<sup>34</sup> However, unlike Watts' verse it is certainly not concerned with giving young 'thoughts a divine turn' or raising, 'a young meditation'.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Eccentric Outsider**

The eccentric non-conformists of Lear's limericks are sometimes courageous and daring, sometimes charming and sometimes completely senseless. Additionally, his limericks are small snapshots of the conflict between individual freedom and 'the stability of the social organism.'<sup>36</sup> In the Victorian Era 'the scale seemed to have tipped too far in the direction of social stability'.<sup>37</sup> Yet within this heavily governed, and restrictive, society, life outside the group could feel menacing. The newly conceived Darwinian perspective 'threatened to leave man much more uncomfortably on his own than any libertarian might wish'.<sup>38</sup> Lear's work continually stands firm. He backs the outsider, devoting 'himself to the plight of the individual'.<sup>39</sup> His eccentric outsiders, 'faced with either a nameless mass society or an indifferent nature',<sup>40</sup> are left 'distinctly alone and "other"'.<sup>41</sup> Lear's

limericks suggest that, as the British Empire ‘evolved’, society’s outsiders may find themselves recast as the ‘other’. One limerick describes an old man who lives in complete disarray, on both a geographical and societal border, and engages in eccentric pastimes such as dancing with cats and making ‘tea in his hat’.<sup>42</sup> This ‘vexes’ the ‘folks on the Border’,<sup>43</sup> although the reader is not told what comes of this vexation. However, in other limericks it often results in violence.

The eccentric of Lear’s limericks often creates fun, or foolish, disorder. The final line usually presents the Insider attitude, drawing attention to social conventions, showing how ‘the protagonist’s behaviour has “distressed” or “vexed” or “perplexed” or “embarrassed” his neighbours’.<sup>44</sup> The eccentric is frequently pitted against ‘sensible society’, which Lear labels ‘they’. Hark shows that the use of real place names ‘causes a tension between sense and nonsense which underscores the tension between these decided individualists and the societies in which they live’.<sup>45</sup> She explains that ““They” have generally been considered the villains of Lear’s world, with an eccentric as the pathetic martyr’.<sup>46</sup> The majority of final lines draw attention to ‘society’s intolerance of anything out of the ordinary’<sup>47</sup> and often ““they” inflict physical harm on the otherwise unquenchable nonconformist’.<sup>48</sup> Tension stems from the differences between the Insiders and Outsiders. In milder displays of eccentricity ‘they’, most often condemn the playful, but unruly, oddball. Sometimes the outsider’s behaviour is so wild, ‘perverse and provoking’<sup>49</sup> that it becomes disordered and violent. In very rare cases ‘they’ step in to ‘provide substantive remedies for an individual’s distress’,<sup>50</sup> breaking Lear’s usual binary structure. The Insider’s caring intervention proves that tension is not an absolute given.

Lear's poetry 'expresses some of the deepest concerns of a highly ambivalent era'.<sup>51</sup> He lived in a time 'torn between a strict set of social conventions adopted to give order to incipient chaos and the restrictions to the individual liberty which that arbitrary order entailed'.<sup>52</sup> Lear's verse shows that 'arbitrary order' as it is both structured and, at times, illogical. He celebrates the illogical because, above all, fate is 'arbitrary in Lear, and the line between joy and disaster is just that thin'.<sup>53</sup>

In Lear's poem 'The Jumblies' he grants a set of imaginative, risk-taking adventurers a miracle in the face of danger. The heroic group face innumerable perils as they foolishly venture to sea in a sieve. 'They' advise the carefree band against such a risky idea.

'You'll all be drowned!'

They called aloud,

'Our Sieve ain't big,

But we don't care a button!

We don't care a fig!

In a Sieve we'll go to sea!'<sup>54</sup>

The happy-go-lucky and daring eccentrics are saved by their imaginative streak and in the end they become the celebrated, and charming, eccentrics of a conservative, but unimaginative, Insider society. 'The Jumblies' represents 'the best kind of Learian miracle – the coming together of the romantic nonconformists and careful society'.<sup>55</sup> While these 'Learian miracles' may be rare, they show Lear's reluctance to blame an uninspired, but sensible, society.

After all, a practical society ‘must sustain civilization in the long interstices between wonders’.<sup>56</sup>

Lear’s extraordinary characters are the product of an extraordinary poet and he casts himself as a pleasant, but strange, individual:

Who has written such volumes of stuff!  
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,  
But a few think him pleasant enough...  
When he walks in his waterproof white,  
The children run after him so!  
Calling out, “He’s gone out in his night-  
Gown, that crazy old Englishman, oh!”<sup>57</sup>

In the above excerpt Lear depicts himself as a poet acting outside the bounds of conventional society. In doing so he fits the “mad poet” stereotype and it is through his poetic practice that he preaches an eccentric brand of ‘fun’.

### **Growth and the Golden Afternoon**

There are, perhaps, few texts that portray childhood as more ‘wonder-filled’ than the *Alice* books. Beginning on a ‘golden afternoon’,<sup>58</sup> Alice’s adventure is fantastic, curious and confusing. In *Alice* growth threatens the ‘golden afternoon’<sup>59</sup> of childhood and, like Wordsworth, Carroll fears the loss of innocence which adulthood brings. Roger Hemming believes Alice’s eating prefigures a fall from innocence. Her enjoyment of food and drink, he says,

represents the flowering of desire, which leads to experience, not innocence. In addition, what Alice consumes changes her in dramatic and disturbing ways. She shrinks rapidly after polishing off a mysterious bottle tasting of 'cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy and hot buttered toast'.<sup>60</sup> After finishing a small cake she shoots up to over nine feet high. Alice cannot control her body, and is so distressed that she bursts into tears. Many have speculated about Carroll's own feelings regarding maturity and adult desire, particularly in regards to Alice Liddell's development. His relationship with his cherished child-friends did suggest an unhealthy fascination. He glamourised childhood and his interest in photographing nude children seems decidedly creepy today. However, in the Victorian period it would not have appeared so shocking. Martin Gardener explains that 'there was a tendency in Victorian England, reflected in much of its literature and art, to idealize the beauty and virginal purity of little girls'.<sup>61</sup> Indeed there was 'no hint of impropriety in the recollections of his many child friends'.<sup>62</sup> Carroll's fear of growth may well have stemmed from a kind of 'Wordsworthian' nostalgia. In 'Solitude', he expressed a wish 'To be once more a little child / for one bright summer day'.<sup>63</sup> He wanted to escape 'Life's decay' and visit again the 'golden hours of Life's young spring, / Of innocence, of love and truth! / Bright, beyond all imagining'.<sup>64</sup>

The Modernist poet, T.S Eliot, later alleviated such a nostalgic yearning by collapsing time in 'Burnt Norton'. He writes:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future is contained in time past...

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility.<sup>65</sup>

This section of *The Four Quartets* draws on nostalgia for the 'golden hours' of youth as it obliterates yearning by simultaneously calling on the reader to remain in the present.

Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear's work has been influential, particularly in the following Modernist period. Both writers portrayed childhood as a time of fun, innocence, imagination and freedom, all qualities which continued to be valued. The *Alice* books have influenced literature and popular culture to such a degree that they are now firmly ingrained in modern childhood. The ongoing influence of *Alice*, and nonsense, is evident in Eliot's work, a poet synonymous with high Modernism. In fact Elizabeth Sewell categorizes Eliot as a nonsense poet rather than a Modernist. *The Waste Land*, she writes, is his 'nearest approach to pure Nonsense practice'<sup>66</sup> because it employs 'classic Nonsense techniques to control'<sup>67</sup> non-nonsense subject matter such as 'myth, love, the poetry and beauty of the past'<sup>68</sup> The fragmented structure of *The Waste Land* has been interpreted as a display of Modernist despair. Sewell, however, argues that fragmentation is 'the Nonsense poet's way of analyzing his subject matter into discrete parts'.<sup>69</sup>

In 'Burnt Norton', Eliot pays homage to Lewis Carroll by recalling the rose garden from *Alice*:

Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden... My words echo  
Thus, in your mind...  
Other echoes  
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?  
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
Into our first world, shall we follow  
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.<sup>70</sup>

The bird, like Carroll's rabbit, leads the reader back to the imaginary first world of childhood, an idyllic Eden ripe with potential. In Carroll and Eliot's worlds reality is re-imagined by the poet, the child and the reader. Things in Nonsense, and Modernism, are not 'played' 'as they are',<sup>71</sup> to borrow a line from Wallace Stevens, because the poetic imagination has the ability to transform a sieve into a boat or invert reality totally. In *Alice* Humpty Dumpty renders mathematic equations senseless, celebrates un-birthdays for 364 days of the year, and gives words whatever meaning, or meanings, he chooses. 'Things are changed upon the blue guitar',<sup>72</sup> wrote Stevens, speaking of his symbolic instrument of the poetic imagination and these 'things' are changed and 'made new' by both nonsense and Modernism.

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- <sup>1</sup> Norejane J. Hendrickson and Nancy Taylor Coghill, 'Nineteenth Century Children's Poetry: A Reflection of the Age', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 11.2 (1986), 72-77, <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v011/11.2.hendrickson.html>> [accessed 23 December 2011], p. 72.
- <sup>2</sup> Hendrickson and Coghill, p. 72.
- <sup>3</sup> Hendrickson and Coghill, p. 75.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature: An Anthology, 1801-1902* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) p. 164
- <sup>5</sup> Hunt, p. 164
- <sup>6</sup> Hendrickson and Coghill, 'Nineteenth Century Children's Poetry', p. 73.
- <sup>7</sup> Ruth Y. Jenkins, 'Imagining the Abject in Kingsley, MacDonald, and Carroll: Disrupting Dominant Values and Cultural Identity in Children's Literature', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 35.1 (2011), 67-87, <[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/lion\\_and\\_the\\_unicorn/v035/35.1.jenkins.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v035/35.1.jenkins.pdf)> [accessed 3 November 2012]. p. 79.
- <sup>8</sup> Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, ed. by Martin Gardner, (London, Penguin Books, 2001) p. XXV.
- <sup>9</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 34.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Flescher, 'The Language of Nonsense in Alice', *Yale French Studies*, 43 (1969), 128 - 144, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2929641>> [accessed 29 Feb 2012], p. 143.
- <sup>11</sup> Flescher, 'The Language of Nonsense in Alice', p. 143.
- <sup>12</sup> K. Narayan Kutty, 'Nonsense As Reality', *Children's Literature*, 5.1 (1976), 286-287, <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 19 February 2014]. p. 286.
- <sup>13</sup> Flescher, p. 128.
- <sup>14</sup> Edward Lear, *The Book of Nonsense*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Amazon.com.
- <sup>15</sup> John Rieder, 'Edward Lear's Limericks: The Function of Children's Nonsense Poetry', *Children's Literature*, 26 (1998), 47-60, <[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens\\_literature/v026/26.rieder.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens_literature/v026/26.rieder.html)> [accessed 20 February 2012], p. 48.
- <sup>16</sup> Flescher, p. 129.
- <sup>17</sup> Flescher, p. 130.
- <sup>18</sup> Flescher, p. 130.
- <sup>19</sup> Flescher, p. 130.
- <sup>20</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 194.
- <sup>21</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 194.
- <sup>22</sup> Flescher, p. 130.
- <sup>23</sup> Flescher, p. 130.
- <sup>24</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 195
- <sup>25</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>26</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>27</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>28</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>29</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>30</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>31</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>32</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 156.
- <sup>33</sup> Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children* (London: John Van Voorst, 1848), p. vii.
- <sup>34</sup> Watts, p. vii.
- <sup>35</sup> Watts, p. vii..
- <sup>36</sup> Ina Rae Hark, 'Eccentricity and Victorian Angst', *Victorian Poetry*, 16. 1/2 (1978), 112-122, <<http://jstor.org/stable/40002589>> [accessed 3 November 2012], p. 122.
- <sup>37</sup> Hark, p. 112.
- <sup>38</sup> Hark, p. 112.
- <sup>39</sup> Hark, p. 113.

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- <sup>40</sup> Hark, p. 113.
- <sup>41</sup> Hark, p. 113.
- <sup>42</sup> Edward Lear, 'There was an Old Man on the Border', Poetry Foundation, updated 2014, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173874>> (accessed 8 December 2014).
- <sup>43</sup> Lear, 'There was an Old Man on the Border'.
- <sup>44</sup> Hark, p. 114.
- <sup>45</sup> Hark, p. 114.
- <sup>46</sup> Hark, p. 114.
- <sup>47</sup> Hark, p. 114.
- <sup>48</sup> Hark, p. 114.
- <sup>49</sup> Edward Lear, *More Nonsense*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Amazon.com ebook.
- <sup>50</sup> Hark, p. 116.
- <sup>51</sup> Hark, p. 113.
- <sup>52</sup> Hark, p. 113.
- <sup>53</sup> Hark, p. 118.
- <sup>54</sup> Edward Lear, *The Jumblies and Other Nonsense Verses*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Amazon.com ebook.
- <sup>55</sup> Hark, p. 117.
- <sup>56</sup> Hark, p. 118.
- <sup>57</sup> Edward Lear, 'How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear', Edward Lear, updated 2014, <<http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/pw/mrlear.html>>[accessed 8 December 2014].
- <sup>58</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 7.
- <sup>59</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 7.
- <sup>60</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. 17.
- <sup>61</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. xxx.
- <sup>62</sup> Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, p. xxx.
- <sup>63</sup> Lewis Carroll, 'Three Sunsets and Other Poems', *Gutenberg.org*, updated 2011, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35497/35497-h/35497-h.htm>>[accessed 17 August 2014].
- <sup>64</sup> Carroll, 'Three Sunsets'.
- <sup>65</sup> T.S Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), Amazon.com ebook.
- <sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, 'Lewis Carroll and T. S. Eliot as Nonsense Poets,' *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Hugh Kenner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 65 - 72 (p.68).
- <sup>67</sup> Sewell, p. 68 - 69.
- <sup>68</sup> Sewell, p. 68 - 69.
- <sup>69</sup> Sewell, p.68 - 69.
- <sup>70</sup> Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets*.
- <sup>71</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 165.
- <sup>72</sup> Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems*, p. 165.

## Chapter Seven: Child's Play: Robert Louis Stevenson's 'A Child's Garden of Verses'

Robert Louis Stevenson, like his Victorian predecessors Carroll and Lear, focused on creativity, adventure, and entertainment. First published in 1885, Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* focuses on fun and imagination, however, it also contains elements of didacticism, with Stevenson impressing upon the reader the importance of play.

Stevenson's verse is not easily categorised. It is partly influenced by the Romantic tradition in that he portrays childhood as a unique time of freedom but his verse is not exclusively Romantic or Victorian and, at times, a developing Modernist perspective is glimpsed. Uncertainty surfaces in a few poems, with the child realising that existence is marked by impermanence. Stevenson portrays childhood in a contradictory manner; it is both a time of fun and imagination and a time of anxiety. Some of this anxiety may be explained by the stresses of Stevenson's childhood. Plagued by illness in his formative years, his work is likely influenced by 'a very mixed experience (of youth); full of fever, nightmare, insomnia, painful days and interminable nights'.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the diverse tones within *A Child's Garden* all of the characters in the collection are connected by a love of imaginative play. Stevenson wrote that to a child 'play is all... "Making believe" is the gist of his whole life, and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character'.<sup>2</sup> Stevenson extols imaginative flexibility as the key virtue of the child and it enables characters of *A Child's Garden* to transcend adult concerns.

The late Victorian period was marked by continued social and political upheaval and change. The Fenian Dynamite Campaign bombed several major British targets from 1881 to 1885 and Clan na Gael detonated seven bombs in the London Underground in 1883. Outside the country, New Imperialism saw colonial engagement in the Anglo-Egyptian war, the Sudan Campaign and the third Anglo-Burmese War. In addition, the Second Industrial Revolution meant continual rapid growth. In the late nineteenth century these ongoing changes and conflicts begin to interrupt children's literature. In the Romantic period the subject matter of children's literature provided some shelter from the previous revolutions and conflicts of the adult world, notably that between Britain and France as well as the rush to acquire new territories. Ann C. Colley explains that the children of Stevenson's verse are able to transcend adult concerns because they have a certain flexibility of imagination. His character's creativity is resilient and transcendent, enabling them 'to realize or make facile the fantasy of empire and eradicate the anxieties attending its displacements'.<sup>3</sup> When danger interrupts Stevenson's texts, it is only to thrill the young reader.

After spending much of his childhood confined to 'the (illness plagued) land of counterpane', Stevenson sought some dangerous fun. He loved a good adventure, especially one fraught with risk, writing: 'If only I could secure a violent death, what a fine success! I wish to die in my boots; no more land of counterpane for me. To be drowned, to be shot, to be thrown from a horse'.<sup>4</sup>

Many poems in *A Child's Garden* are sketches of wild adventure and the collection reflects the vigorous flexibility of Stevenson's own poetic imagination.

Like Wordsworth he experiments with the nostalgic imagination, delving into his own memories to create characters which share some elements of his own youth. Some poems are joyful and adventurous, some are full of frustration, and others speak of confusion and fear. *A Child's Garden* straddles the Romantic, Victorian and Modernist periods and, as such, the collection resists categorization.

However, Stevenson's wish to promote freedom, imagination, play and spirited fun underpins all of the poems.

### **Victorian Adventures within a Romantic Garden**

In *Apology for Idlers* Stevenson wrote: 'people should be a good deal idle in youth...If you look back on your own education, I am sure it will not be the full, vivid, instructive hours of truantry that you regret; you would rather cancel some lack-lustre periods between sleep and waking in the class'.<sup>5</sup> Stevenson's sentiment echoes that of Wordsworth and both writers call for a childhood spent in nature, although Stevenson prefers a slightly more tame version of nature. The title of *A Child's Garden* is emblematic. The collection has little to do with gardens, except for the small section 'Garden Days', but symbolically the title recalls Romantic ideas of growth within a natural setting. The poems 'Summer Sun', 'The Flowers' and 'The Unseen Playmate' paint a Romantic picture of a child at one with nature but within an enclosed and safe setting. Jean Webb states that Stevenson's garden is a safe extension of the house as well as a 'space for free and imaginative play'.<sup>6</sup> Stevenson loved adventure but he was less fond of the wild landscapes which

nourished Wordsworth. He believed he lacked the spirit for 'wild and inhospitable places',<sup>7</sup> stating: 'I am happier where it is tame and fertile'.<sup>8</sup>

The enclosed space of *A Child's Garden* carries the innocence of Eden, bringing to mind the Romantic idea of the innocent child free from sin. In 'The Flowers' the speaker enjoys some idle imaginative hours spent amongst the 'fairest woods'.<sup>9</sup> Within the 'fairy woods',<sup>10</sup> there exist 'tiny trees for tiny dames'.<sup>11</sup> In this enchanted garden the narrator declares: 'If I were not so tall, / I should live for good and all'.<sup>12</sup> The child, an inhabitant of this fascinating, and safe, place is free to engage in imaginative play. Likewise, the garden is a protective spot where readers may safely look to, 'a projected future with the child preparing for the formulation of the as yet undefined self'.<sup>13</sup>

Like Wordsworth, Stevenson's Romanticism contains elements of a positive nostalgia. Colley writes that 'he was part of a culture that found in the past a means of resolving (rather than creating) tension or difference'.<sup>14</sup> Nostalgia brought Stevenson pleasure by returning him return to the source of his imaginative flexibility. He could recall scenes from his childhood intensely, writing in one letter: 'I could crawl without any noise through the leaves, I could hide under a carrot plant, it used to be my favourite boast that I always WALKED into the den'.<sup>15</sup> However, there are some poems where he employs abstract and imprecise adjectives suggesting a certain lack of engagement with his youth. Rebecca Lukens complains that these verses are clichéd, drab and lacking in intensity, stating: 'such bland wordiness shows no conviction that children loose themselves in play'.<sup>16</sup> Stevenson's poems, she writes: 'are grayed with abstract

and non-sensory adjectives like “merry,” “pleasant,” “jolly,” and sweet’.<sup>17</sup> Lukens describes the rhythm as boring and predictable and the poems unimaginative in their use of devices. She defines poetry as an exercise in ‘compactness, figurativeness, rhythm and sound patterns, and emotional intensity’.<sup>18</sup> However she is looking through the contemporary lens of poetry, where poetry is a predominantly creative practice and a form of ‘high art’. Lukens asserts that contemporary children’s poetry is written in a more precise manner and makes ‘vivid the experiences and feelings of childhood’.<sup>19</sup> Lukens concept of poetry has an extra 100 years of cultural history on Stevenson’s.

What appears to be a lack of precision, and sentimentality, can be explained by Stevenson’s positive form of nostalgia. In this sense Stevenson’s concept of poetry is in line with the Romantics. Wordsworth wrote: ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from recollection in tranquility’.<sup>20</sup> Stevenson’s poetry does indeed originate from recollections of youth and his work centres around the philosophy that childhood is special. He believed that play, in particular, must be protected. While, Lukens protests that ‘the idea of making a ship upon the stairs...is all that lingers in the verse’<sup>21</sup> this is precisely what Stevenson aimed to achieve. He seeks to present the idea of ‘free and imaginative play’<sup>22</sup> within a safe Romantic garden to encourage the reader to go out and have fun.

In ‘Foreign Lands’ Stevenson’s character climbs ‘Up into the cherry tree’<sup>23</sup> to ‘look abroad on foreign lands’.<sup>24</sup> The tree is an extension of the protective garden and by clambering up its solid limbs the child is able to look

further abroad, both literally and imaginatively. The child's curiosity and imagination crave more and the child wishes that he could 'find a higher tree' so 'farther and farther [he might] see'.<sup>25</sup> He imagines the ships at sea and dreams up a vision of a 'fairy land'<sup>26</sup> where children co-exist with playthings that come to life at tea time. This fictitious land, created in the outward looking and protective space of the garden, is a place of potential play for the child with the flexible imagination.

### **A Developing Modernist Perspective**

There are occasional hints, when the young characters peek over the fence of the Romantic garden, that the 'projected future' may not be as reliably safe as their imaginations suggest. In the world beyond a Modernist uncertainty begins to emerge.

Beneath the nostalgia and imaginative play, a troubled and more realistic world sometimes lurks. 'Bed in Summer', for example, shows a developing 'Modernist awareness of the confusion and puzzlement of childhood'.<sup>27</sup> In the poem the bewildered young narrator receives a lesson in disappointment. Childhood is not romanticized as Stevenson's perplexed narrator explains:

In winter I get up at night  
And dress by yellow-candle light.  
In summer quite the other way  
I have to go to bed by day.<sup>28</sup>

The child wishes to play but it is time for bed and they are confused when the adults, who act as outsiders, enforce a seemingly strange rule. The speaker feels left out of the excitement and the use of the verb *have* signifies a lack of power. The child complains 'I have to go to bed'<sup>29</sup> and yet everyone, and everything, is up. There are 'birds still hopping on the tree'<sup>30</sup> and the sounds of 'grown-up people's feet'<sup>31</sup> pass on the street outside.

In the third stanza the child asks the reader does it seem hard to them: 'to have to go to bed by day?'<sup>32</sup> Life still goes on around them and 'the sky is clear and blue'<sup>33</sup> and they 'should like so much to play'.<sup>34</sup> The child, enclosed within the safe space of his room, does not understand their confinement. They cannot tell the time and they do not understand the changing light of the seasons and, given their experience, their reasoning is quite logical. Like the mysterious adult rules of time and fluctuating seasons, the child's position, although safe, carries some uncertainty.

Impermanence appears again in 'At the Seaside', a short poem which describes a day at the beach digging holes. The narrator says: 'My holes were empty like a cup. / In every hole the sea came up'.<sup>35</sup> Webb writes:

In certainty the child has made a hole in the sand, yet that materiality has changed by circumstances beyond his control. The very shore upon which the child stands, has a dual personality: both solid and liquid. Stevenson moves his subject from certainty to uncertainty, with the child being left in a state of puzzlement'.<sup>36</sup>

However, the poem does not give any firm indication of puzzlement. It simply depicts the child's digging and the sea filling the holes: 'the sea came up / Till it could come no more'.<sup>37</sup> Stevenson does not give any indication of the child's response to the scene, therefore, the physical nature of the poem is all the reader can be sure of. The poem is set in a changing landscape but there is not enough evidence to suggest a Modernist mistrust of change. Indeed, it could be argued that the child's intense focus on the holes filling with water is suggestive of wonder and delight in the seaside game.

However, 'My Shadow' does hint at a developing Modernist perspective. As in 'Bed in Summer', aspects of the child's world puzzle them, such as their changeable shadow. The shadow is unreliable, like the perplexing seasons in 'Bed in Summer' but it is still fun. Stevenson writes: 'the funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow'.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the shadow's unpredictability amuses; sometimes he, 'shoots up (tall) like an india-rubber ball'.<sup>39</sup> Yet, despite this, the cheeky and changeable companion carries some alarming qualities:

What can be the use of him is more than I can see...

Not at all like proper children...

He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,

And he can only make a fool of me in very sort of way.<sup>40</sup>

Webb argues that 'the shadow is an image of the self which is constructed of light and dark. It is unreliable, morally flawed, and antagonistic towards the child's constrained, physically solid 'other''.<sup>41</sup> Yet what Webb describes as antagonistic tendencies, may also be read as embarrassment at the shadow's clingy nature.

Ultimately the shadow is an amusing and surprising companion, one to 'jump before me, when I jump into my bed'<sup>42</sup> and who presumably has other funny characteristics since the 'way he likes to grow'<sup>43</sup> is described as 'the funniest'.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the differences in interpretation, the Modernist concern with change and impermanence is faintly present within 'My Shadow'. It is much fainter than, for example, 'The Wasteland' where T.S Eliot also uses the shadow motif to describe impermanence. He tells the reader they will see something different than the usual passage of shadows:

There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.<sup>45</sup>

Eliot's shadow is an eerie double and it changes with the passing of time. The shadow is as impermanent as the unromantic human condition. Eliot writes: 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust'<sup>46</sup> as he pushes the description of impermanence further than Stevenson. His work reveals a bleak truth; that we will all eventually return to dust. The divergence between Stevenson and Eliot's use of the shadow motif is also, and perhaps most fundamentally, the result of their different audience as well as the different moments in which they write. Eliot writes for an adult audience coming to terms with the upheaval and tragedy of World War One, while Stevenson writes for children who remain relatively safe in the confines of the late Victorian, middle class, domestic garden.

When impermanence does occur in Stevenson's work it is often a faint undercurrent, which only occasionally provokes unease. Impermanence is not always negative and Stevenson uses the joy of play to show delight in the face of change.

### **The Unseen Playmate; The Importance of Play and the Flexible Imagination**

At the end of the 1800s there was an increasing interest in the links between creativity, play and development. Play was seen as a way for children to test out their thinking and actions and develop their knowledge. In Henri Newbolt's 1897 poem 'Vitai Lampada' the children must 'Play up! play up! and play the game!' with a 'joyful mind' to learn to 'bear through life like a torch in flame'.<sup>47</sup>

Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten system, which was popular towards the end of the nineteenth century, also centred around the idea of play; in a structured form.

Learning occurred in the form of singing, dancing, gardening, 'free work' and playing with Froebel educational toys. Many of these toys are thought to have influenced the abstract art movement, particularly the work of Paul Klee.

Froebel's system, which was invented in the first half of the nineteenth century, grew in popularity towards the end of the century, signaling a shift away from the more religious styles of education. Initially the kindergarten system was considered too 'atheistic'.

*A Child's Garden* reflects this growing interest in play and subtly instructs the reader in its virtues. Stevenson creates an imaginative space for the reader while also re-experiencing his own love of adventure and play. In his verse and

letters he describes, acutely, his childhood memories all suffused with ‘the vicarious violence of play’<sup>48</sup> and imagination. Child’s play, explains Stevenson, bursts with intense activity and the child ‘leaps, he runs, and sets the blood agog all over his body. And so the play breathes him; and he no sooner assumes a passion than he gives it vent’.<sup>49</sup> Anne C. Colley writes that most of all Stevenson ‘wanted to be back among his boyhood play’.<sup>50</sup>

As a child the imaginative flexibility of play delighted Stevenson and as he matured this grew into another form. He created intense adventures like *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and *The Master of Ballantrae*, no doubt drawing on the imaginative flexibility which marked his youth. Like Wordsworth he believed that in order to create, the adult must ‘return to the spirit of (their) first years’.<sup>51</sup> Although the imaginative return may ‘stir up uncomfortable and sorrowful memories’<sup>52</sup> and remind one sharply ‘of old wounds’.<sup>53</sup> We come across many unfortunate passages’,<sup>54</sup> wrote Stevens, ‘and find our own conduct smartly reprimanded’.<sup>55</sup> The child is free from such painful nostalgia. Rather than reliving uncomfortable scenes, they re-enact scenes involving others. Child’s play projects into the future whereas the creative adult, says Stevenson, must look back. Stevenson also wrote that ‘the true parallel for play is not to be found...in conscious art, which, though it be derived from play, is itself an abstract, impersonal thing’.<sup>56</sup> He leans on the philosophical approach to art, and poetry, when he writes that creating ‘depends largely upon philosophical interests beyond the scope of childhood’.<sup>57</sup>

In the closing poem of *A Child's Garden* he instructs the reader, beseeching them to:

Go and play...

And remember in your playing, as the seafog rolls to you

Long ere you could read it, how I told you what to do.<sup>58</sup>

This poem urges children to cherish play before the 'shades of the prison-house' close 'with a vengeance'<sup>59</sup> and playthings must be abandoned for good.

Imaginative, and precious, adventures, 'within and beyond the borders of the garden wall',<sup>60</sup> are fleeting as the flexibility of thought declines with age.

In 'Pirate Story' the landscape is flexible, both imaginatively and physically but there is no Modernist anxiety at this change, only joy. Three imaginative children transform a basket into a boat, grass into wind-blown waves and charging cattle into a squadron on the sea. The poem features few adjectives, but those that appear, such as 'afloat' and 'abroad', signify movement and change. The many active verbs, 'blowing', 'adventure', 'a-steering', 'a-rowing', 'a-charging', 'roar' and 'escape', reinforce this. Collective pronouns, like 'we' and 'us', and the repetition of the word 'three', conjure up a lively expedition among friends:

Three of us afloat in the meadow by the swing,

Three of us abroad in the basket on the lea.

Winds are in the air, they are blowing in the spring,

And waves are on the meadow like the waves there are at sea.<sup>61</sup>

Here Stevenson's changeable world is full of thrilling possibility. He writes: 'Where shall we adventure, to-day that we're afloat, / Shall it be to Africa... To Providence or Babylon or off to Malabar?'<sup>62</sup> Chance throws the trio into dangerous water but they turn a risky situation into something sensational. Cattle charge towards them and they shout: 'Hi! There's a squadron a-rowing on the sea'.<sup>63</sup> 'Quick' exclaims one, 'we'll escape them, they're as mad as they can be.'<sup>64</sup> The children are aware that safety is near as 'the wicket is the harbour and the garden is the shore',<sup>65</sup> but the poem proves that the changing Modernist world does not necessarily threaten those with imaginative flexibility and a love of play.

Stevenson's view of childhood, as a time of spontaneity, fun and imagination continued in the years following his death in 1894. Like Stevenson, Marcel Proust, in the early 1900s stressed 'spontaneity and imagination as the treasured virtue of the young'<sup>66</sup> and these treasured virtues continue to exist in the contemporary concept of the child.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann C. Colley, 'Writing Towards Home': The Landscape of 'A Child's Garden of Verses', *Victorian Poetry*, 35.3 (1997), 303-318, <<http://www.jstor.org.stable/40003054>> [accessed 23 September 2014]. p. 305.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson; Miscellanies: Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, (London: T. and A. Constable, 1895), p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Colley, p. 308.

<sup>4</sup> Colley, p 313.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2012), Amazon.com ebook

<sup>6</sup> Jean Webb, 'Conceptualising Childhood: Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 32.3, (1980 - 1981), 49-55, <<http://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/abs/10.1080/0305764022000024203>> [accessed 23 September], p. 360.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, *The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

<sup>8</sup> Stevenson, *The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Flowers', *A Child's Garden of Verses*, (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2012), Amazon.com ebook

<sup>10</sup> Stevenson, 'The Flowers', *A Child's Garden*.

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- <sup>11</sup> Stevenson, 'The Flowers', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>12</sup> Stevenson, 'The Flowers', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>13</sup> Webb, p. 360.
- <sup>14</sup> Colley, p. 304.
- <sup>15</sup> Stevenson, *The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*.
- <sup>16</sup> Rebecca Lukens, 'Stevenson's Garden: Verse is Verse', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 4.2, (1980-1981), 49-55,  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/lion\\_and\\_the\\_unicorn/v004/4.2.lukens.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v004/4.2.lukens.html)>  
[accessed 12 November 2014], p. 50
- <sup>17</sup> Lukens, p. 50.
- <sup>18</sup> Lukens, p. 49.
- <sup>19</sup> Lukens, p. 53.
- <sup>20</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, ed. by William Richey and Daniel Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p. 393.
- <sup>21</sup> Lukens, p. 50.
- <sup>22</sup> Webb, p. 360.
- <sup>23</sup> Stevenson, 'Foreign Lands', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>24</sup> Stevenson, 'Foreign Lands', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>25</sup> Stevenson, 'Foreign Lands', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>26</sup> Stevenson, 'Foreign Lands', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>27</sup> Webb, p. 362.
- <sup>28</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>29</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>30</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>31</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>32</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>33</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>34</sup> Stevenson, 'Bed in Summer', *A Child's Garden*.
- <sup>35</sup> Stevenson, 'At the Seaside', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>36</sup> Webb, p. 363.
- <sup>37</sup> Stevenson, 'At the Seaside', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>38</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>39</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>40</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>41</sup> Webb, pp. 363 - 364.
- <sup>42</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>43</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>44</sup> Stevenson, 'My Shadow', *Child's Garden*.
- <sup>45</sup> T.S Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *The Waste Land, Prufrock and other Poems*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), p. 31-32.
- <sup>46</sup> Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *The Waste Land, Prufrock and other Poems*, p.32.
- <sup>47</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'Vitae Lampada', updated 2003, <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/vitae-lampada/>>[accessed 23 September 2014].
- <sup>48</sup> Colley, p. 304.
- <sup>49</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson; Miscellanies: Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, (London: T. and A. Constable, 1895), p. 165.
- <sup>50</sup> Colley, p. 306.
- <sup>51</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>52</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>53</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>54</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>55</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>56</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.
- <sup>57</sup> Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 165.

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- <sup>58</sup> Stevenson, 'To My Name Child', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>59</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), p. 63.
- <sup>60</sup> Colley, p. 304.
- <sup>61</sup> Stevenson, 'Pirate Story', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>62</sup> Stevenson, 'Pirate Story', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>63</sup> Stevenson, 'Pirate Story', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>64</sup> Stevenson, 'Pirate Story', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>65</sup> Stevenson, 'Pirate Story', *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
- <sup>66</sup> Jane Missner Barstow, 'Charles Dickens, Marcel Proust and Gunter Grass on Childhood', *Children's Literature*, 7 (1978), 147 - 168,  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens\\_literature/v007/7.barstow.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/journals/childrens_literature/v007/7.barstow.pdf)>  
[accessed 10 November 2012]. p. 152.

## Conclusion

I opened my study with the idea that each poem in this thesis functions like a “snapshot”, capturing ‘The Child’ in a particular light or style to emphasise certain flattering or exemplary qualities. When these ‘snapshots’ are placed side by side the principal ‘stars’ of childhood are revealed, ‘first one beam, and then another’,<sup>1</sup> until distinct ‘trails’ may be seen. The two most obvious ‘trails’ are the Didactic and the Imaginative.

Betterment of the reader is the clear goal of Green Box, or Didactic, poetry. Instruction is the main objective, with this style of poetry primarily offering knowledge, moral teachings, spiritual guidance or helpful rules. Nevertheless, delight is an important aim and Didactic poetry employs ‘catchy’ rhymes and meter to achieve this.

The primary aim of the Imaginative, or Blue Box, style of poetry is to bring pleasure. However, improvement remains a subtle goal, with poets promoting ‘virtues’ of a different kind, namely freedom, adventure, creativity, fun, playfulness and ‘a degree of ‘wildness’.

All of the poets I discuss, even staunch Didactics like Watts, write within an imaginative genre. Additionally, all poets, even the most Imaginative, wish to influence their readers either by changing, or reinforcing, particular attitudes or behaviour. The maxim ‘the children are the future’ informs each poet’s work as, like Stevens, they sing a ‘tune beyond us, yet ourselves’.

In 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', Wallace Stevens describes a poem as 'both a star and an orb'.<sup>1</sup> For Stevens, individual poems both emanate from, and add to, the larger world of poetic ideas. The poetry of the 'World of Children' is enclosed within the larger 'World of Poetry', a much older, and vaster, 'world (of) worlds'.<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis I divide the 'World of Poetry' into four main "territories", the Didactic, the Utopian, the Transcendental and the Imaginative, and I describe the poetry of the 'World of Children' in the same terms. Based on my teaching experience I initially assumed that poetry written for children was either Didactic or Imaginative and that these two "territories" were at war.

However, upon investigation I learned that the Didactic and Imaginative are not involved in a straightforward struggle. At times these "territories" have co-existed and on other occasions they have joined forces to champion particular virtues. Regardless of the approach, all of the ten poets featured in this thesis concentrate on the 'formative years', believing that the foundations of character and ideology are laid in childhood. Each poet writes from a Utopian perspective in that they use poetry to 'make people better'.<sup>3</sup> They wish to inspire and delight their readers, sometimes, in the case of William Wordsworth, drawing on the Transcendental approach to do this.

While the Didactic and the Imaginative share some similarities, there is one clear point of difference. The first sees childhood as a state to be carefully managed, whereas the latter approach wishes to protect and treasure the 'golden years' of youth. To illustrate these differences I began in 1715 with Isaac Watts'

*Songs Divine and Moral Songs* and ended in 1885 with Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

Watts' feared that the mismanagement of children resulted in dire consequences for both the child and the nation. *Divine Songs* was incredibly influential and in it Watts sought to purge children of Original Sin by delivering lessons in piety. After discussing didacticism at work in *Divine Songs* I moved on to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Blake's poetry centres on social concerns, but his anti-authoritarian stance is the opposite of Watts' outlook. Blake's work is underpinned by an idiosyncratic philosophy of religion that links faith to creativity and individuality. The work of Charles and Mary Lamb, Charlotte Smith and Anna Laetitia Barbauld also focuses on social concerns, namely gender and education, with creativity preoccupying Charlotte Smith. Wordsworth, as a transcendental poet, wrote in a philosophical style, joining his theories of poetry to religion and childhood to inspire readers, while reminding them of their own divinity. Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll wrote in the Blue Box style, calling for fun, imagination and individuality in their nonsense verse. Likewise, Robert Louis Stevenson's verse encourages fun and creativity. He focuses on play as he honours childhood as a unique state.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries lie beyond the direct focus of this thesis, but my teaching experience leads me to believe that the qualities Stevenson extols are still in vogue and that a collision between the Didactic and the Imaginative is a current feature of writing for, and about, childhood. Given the complex history of poetry for and about children, this could well change in the

future. Current and future philosophies of childhood and poetry is an area with considerable scope for more investigation.

Stevens' description of a poem as 'both a star and an orb',<sup>4</sup> or a world within worlds, offers an alternative to the dichotomous thinking about poetry in which readers, critics and teachers can sometimes become trapped. His metaphors describe a reality in flux, one which is dependent upon many elements rather than two in opposition. This thesis has sought to demonstrate that both the World of Children and the wider world of 'Ideas about Poetry' are shifting, interconnected and complex. All of the poets I have discussed draw from the evolving World of Poetic ideas. Each poet seeks to 'make people better',<sup>5</sup> as they sing 'a tune beyond ourselves',<sup>6</sup> hoping that as readers we may find 'Ourselves in the tune'<sup>7</sup>; a variety of voices also adding to a vision of a future world.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems*, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'Art and Poetry', *Studia Logica*, 2.6 (2013) 383 - 384, <[http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina\\_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf](http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/studialogica/s-p-f/volumina_i-iv/II-06-Tatarkiewicz-small.pdf)> [accessed 20 April 2014], p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems*, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Tatarkiewicz, p. 381.

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<sup>6</sup> Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems*, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Collected Poems*, p. 167.

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