
Playful Words: the educational significance of children's linguistic and literary play

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

ABSTRACT This article is the text of a keynote address given to the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation at its annual conference in Chicago in February 2009. Three examples of children's linguistic and literary playfulness are examined, two from England and one from the USA. The article explores the radical implications of these examples for primary education, identifying four values in particular that children's literary play calls for: empathy, freedom of time and space, conversation, and documentation.

My subject is play: its cultural significance, its central place in children's thought and language, and its revolutionary implications for education. I am using the word 'play' to cover a wide range of activity. I take it that to play means to pretend, to make-believe, to invent, to imagine, to fabricate, to speculate, to imitate, to dream. In particular I want to think about children's play with words.

My starting point, remote as it may seem, is Wittgenstein's late masterpiece, *Philosophical Investigations*. In a controversial study of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, entitled *Inheritance and Originality*, Stephen Mulhall argues that the opening pages of *Philosophical Investigations* offer us, in effect, the story of our life with words. Wittgenstein's story, as interpreted by Mulhall, tells of the intimate bond between language and play: of children's play, incited and encouraged by their elders, as the primary means whereby language is acquired, and of playfulness as fundamental to the continuing vitality of language itself. According to Mulhall, this story lies at the heart of Wittgenstein's celebrated concept of the 'language-game.' 'The very point of the term 'language game'' Mulhall suggests, 'lies in the double implication that its duality opens up; it allows Wittgenstein to imply that language both generates and is engendered by playing games with words – that play is not only our route into the inheritance of language but also an essential dimension of the language we thereby inherit.'

Playfulness opens up the future, both our own future as cultural agents and the future of language, its capacity to respond to our developing ideas, interests, projects and practices. Language is in turn transformed and transformative as we seek to appropriate it for our own creative purposes. Inheritance and originality are inseparable. It is by playing with words that we enter into our inheritance and, in that very act, revise, renew and re-make it. When we stop being playful, language dies.

Thus, as Mulhall concludes, 'a child will experiment with its words, excitedly repeating them, trying them out in new contexts, putting them together, and so on; it will use them imaginatively. We might say that a child has a future with its words... Words without a future – words which contain no possibility for their users of playful, creative repetition, of projection into new contexts – are not obviously words at all.' Or to put it the other way round, 'In Wittgenstein's child human culture finds an independent life, an unpredictable future – he and his culture can grow and develop together.'

I want to examine three examples of children's playfulness in the light of this philosophical narrative and to ask what they mean for education. I have set each of my examples within its own narrative context. Here, then, are three particular stories of children's lives with words.

ONE

I begin with a brief anecdote. It is the story of an incident that happened at my own school some twenty years ago and which has stuck in my mind ever since. I have often told this tale but it was not until last year that I got round to writing it down.

It happened a while ago now, back in the closing years of the last century when I was still a working schoolteacher. Already much of the detail has slipped from my memory and I am driven to invent what I can no longer recall. But I remember the words themselves, how could I forget them? Let's say it was towards the end of a long, hard winter. Perhaps it was; at any rate, it suits the story. The children of Harwell School were winding themselves up for a boisterous springtime, dashing around the playground, shouting and shoving, venturing onto the still wet but fast drying field, darting inside from time to time, and, above all – oh the horror of it – running down the corridors. Something must be done, something said, said the teachers. The lot fell to me, well I was head teacher after all. So one fine day, in morning assembly, with the whole school gathered in the hall, 130 children from five to eleven years old, I spoke about how to behave, reminding the children of a few school rules: no fighting in the playground, no charging in and out of school, no shouting in the dining hall, and today in particular, no running down the corridors. Slow down, take care, keep calm, act grown up; that, more or less, was the message. The children, sitting cross-legged on the floor, listened with weary politeness. Some seemed almost interested, others

indifferent; a few of the older ones looked at me with disdain, as if I couldn't possibly mean them. In short, much as ever.

Later that day Nadine Baker, young teacher of five-year-olds, came strolling down the corridor on her way from the classroom to the staff room for lunch when two small girls from her own class burst out of the dining hall at speed and ran straight into her. Stopping them in their tracks Nadine tried to be stern. 'Hey you two, what was Mr Armstrong talking about in assembly this morning? No running down the corridors, remember?'

The two girls looked up at Mrs Baker, smiling sweetly, entirely unabashed. 'We're not running,' they explained confidentially, 'we're horses.' And with that, and a toss of the head, they galloped off into the playground.

Nadine checked herself, smiled after them, and hurried on into the staff room to tell the tale.

It's a slight but significant story. These two five year olds were experimenting with language much as Stephen Mulhall envisages. We may interpret their response to their teacher's reminder in a variety of ways. They were playing with words, with the word 'running' in particular, not so much to excuse as to justify themselves, by redescribing the situation in such a way as to exclude themselves from its constraints. They were implicitly teasing their teachers for their lack of imagination, for their disregard of play, for their obtuse insistence on the mundane. They were acknowledging the power of fantasy by revelling in metamorphosis – 'we're horses.' And they were exploring the potential of metaphor, by substituting one character for another, horses for children. Of course, they were also asking for trouble, but what else can you expect in a world ruled by your elders. Or perhaps they had already guessed that, to Mrs Baker at least, their reply might be acceptable; surely she would enter into the spirit of the game.

In Stephen Mulhall's terms we can say that these two children have a lively future with their words. They are finding a language with which to articulate their prime concerns, appropriating words, concepts and images to serve their individual and independent cultural purposes. The success of their education, whether in or out of school, will depend on keeping this language alive as the children grow in knowledge. Wittgenstein's insight was to recognise that play itself is the necessary condition for this achievement.

I want to look forward a year or two now, to the moment when children have begun to master the art of writing and to explore the playfulness which it generates. And so to my second story.

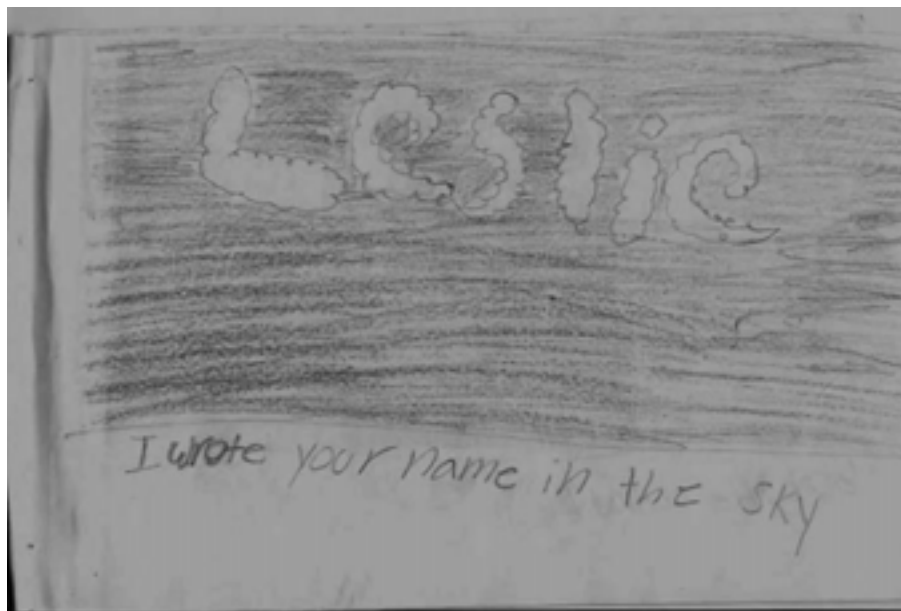
TWO

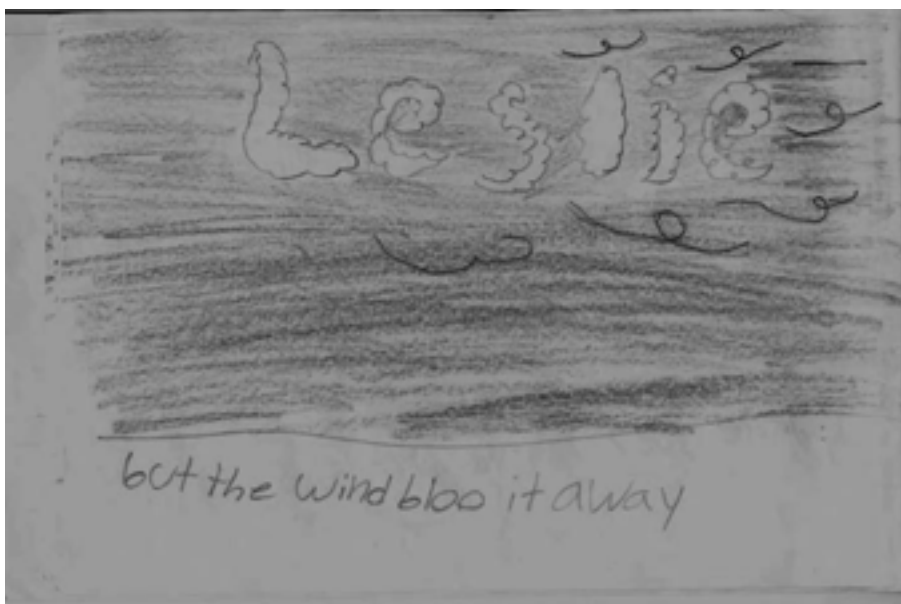
It was the morning after the presidential election. Miss Barry, as the children call her, had pinned to the wall of her third grade classroom at the Henry K. Oliver school in downtown Lawrence, the front page of the *Eagle Tribune* whose headline ran 'Change has Come', above a photograph of Barack Obama

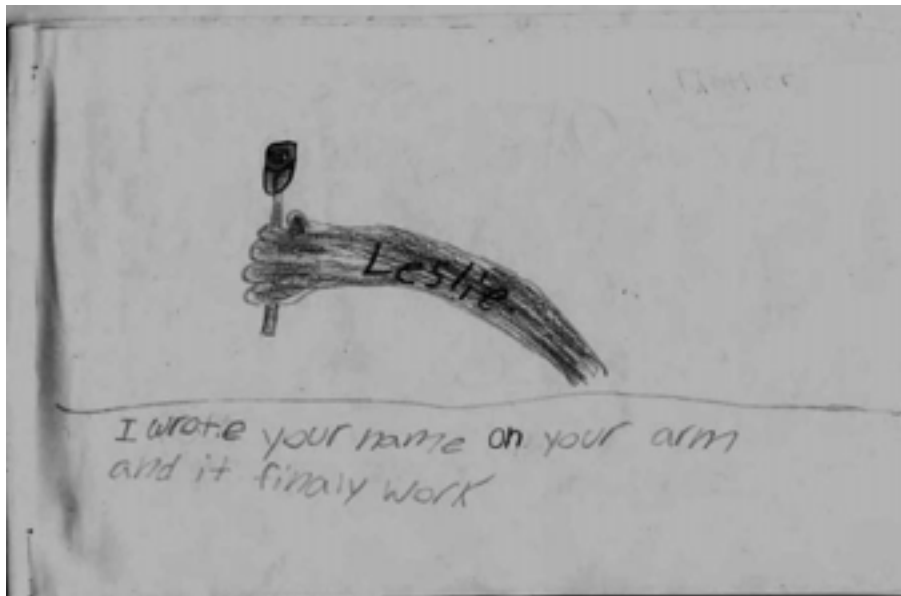
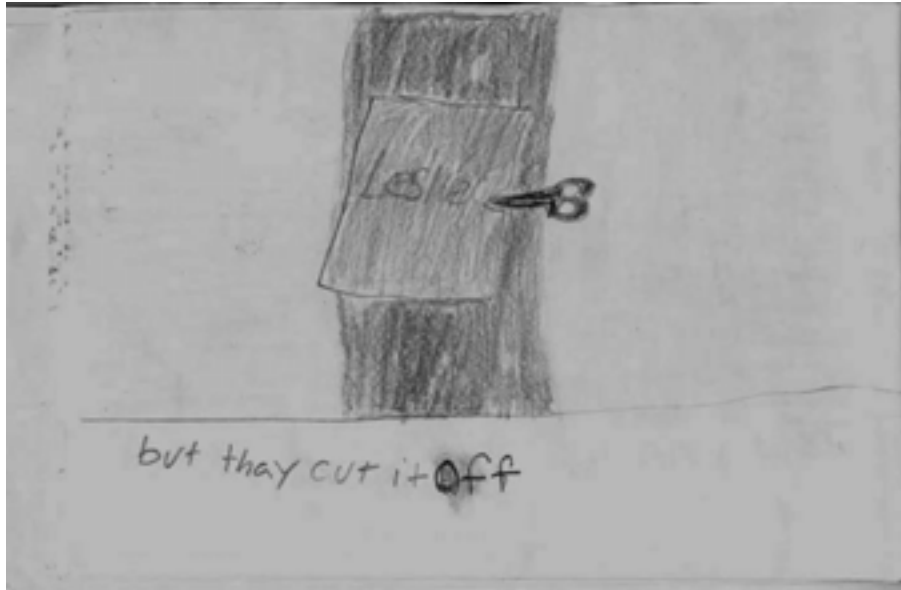
addressing the ecstatic crowds in his victory speech. Later that day, on the classroom rug, one of the children, most of whom are Dominican Americans, would show us how her mother came into her bedroom to tell her that Obama had won, waving her arms above her head and shouting for joy. But for now the children had more immediate matters to attend to. Kenneth had spent much of the previous day, when the school was closed, drawing. He had drawn an apartment block, a dog, a car, and a hamster house, as he called it. He held the drawings up for all to see. Best of all, he had drawn and written, in a tiny home-made booklet, its pages stapled together with drawing pins, a story about dinosaurs, accompanied by pages of information entitled 'these are facts' or 'did you know.' He passed it round the class, standing proudly as he handed it to each child in turn and thanking everyone who commented on his work.

Meanwhile the little book had given Miss Barry an idea. The set lesson plan was discarded as she informed the children of her change of mind. They wouldn't continue with *Success for All*, the narrow-minded literacy programme forced on schools by an embattled administration, not that day at any rate. Instead she invited the children to invent their own illustrated stories, using books similar to Kenneth's; she was already preparing them as she spoke. The children returned to their desks, smiling and eager, and for the next hour or so there was near silence as everyone thought and drew and wrote, from time to time sharing their work with a neighbour, while Miss Barry wandered from desk to desk, encouraging, observing, reading, and occasionally answering a question or making a suggestion. The atmosphere was one of whole-hearted engagement in a playful but genuine task, at once intense and relaxed. Many of the children wrote fantasy stories, others stories about themselves, while a few attempted something akin to poetry, with titles such as *My Dream*, *My Life*, *What do I see?*, *I Just Flew*. One story, in particular, caught my attention, although it might better be described as a lyrical ballad. It was called *I Wrote Your Name* and its author was Christian Dominguez.









I Wrote Your Name. Leslie, Christian told me, is his mother's name and it is to her that his ballad is addressed. At the top of the back page of the small illustrated booklet, as a kind of afterword, he has written, without illustration, the words 'I love you', in large, faint letters.

Earlier, I quoted Stephen Mulhall's description of how 'a child will experiment with its words, excitedly repeating them, trying them out in new contexts, putting them together, and so on; he will use words imaginatively.' Christian uses words, and their associated images, precisely as Mulhall describes, yet his poetic tale is not so much an example of a child's playful experiment with words as itself the story of such an experiment. The power in a name is a common enough theme in literature and folklore. In the Forest of Arden, Orlando, like many another lover from time immemorial, writes Rosalind's name on the trees in witness of his love:

*Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree
The fair, the chaste, the unexpressive she.*

But Christian's aim is otherwise. The poem's narrator is not calling on the world represented by the farm, the sky, or the lettered page, to bear witness to his love; he is searching for the place where the name belongs, repeatedly trying it out in one context after another in an attempt to determine its home, its meaning, its identity, 'the unexpressive she.' It is not to be found in the farm, the sky, the paper. At large in the world of nature, work and culture, the name lacks significance. It is no sooner written than it is erased. Whatever the writer's intention, the name he lovingly writes remains anonymous, as anonymous as the un-named 'they' who dismantle it. It is only when it has been written on the loved one's own arm that the name survives and persists for that is the one place where the loved name has meaning. The meaning of the name is the person for whom the name stands; name and the named are one. 'I wrote your name on your arm and it finally work;' that is to say, the name has found its only possible resting place, the name has gone to earth.

Those last three words, 'it finally work,' are the key to the entire story, instructing us how to read it. It is a meditation on naming, in particular on naming and love. As such it is a narrative variation on a theme which bulks large in the lives of children, both in their play – their rhyming games, their play with dolls, their make-believe – and in routine circumstances such as their responses to the attendance register at school, the way they address their teachers, the often invoked secrecy or inadmissability of their elders' first names. Incidentally, I wouldn't want to correct that final word, 'work.' It may not be Standard English but it has a special significance here, poised between past and present as well as between cultures – a delicate and precious sign of its writer's individuality

I want to turn now to the visual form of Christian's story. The lay-out of the text is carefully contrived. The reverse side of the title page is blank and the effect of this is to ensure that, throughout the rest of the tale, there is a visual lacuna, a hiatus, between the writing of the name and its subsequent erasure.

You turn the page on each occasion of its inscription, only to find that the written name is on the point of disappearing, washed out or blown away or cut. On each occasion, that is, until the final page, where the lacuna itself disappears because, at last, word and person are united. Thus the lay-out of the story echoes and underlines its meaning; it is the visual embodiment of the written text. The same can be said of the illustrations accompanying each page of text. Their simple clarity captures the essence of the moment; the barn in open country, with its wide open door, the red walls typical of New England barns, and a large yellow sun looking in from the top right-hand corner of the page; the blue sky on which the name has been written in the form of fleecy clouds; the paper laid on a wooden table top; the bent brown arm on which the name Leslie has at last been written without being erased.[It seems scarcely necessary to point out the significance of the colour of that arm on the day after Barack Obama's election.] The drawings on the verso pages are almost identical with the corresponding recto pages except for the carefully chosen evidence of imminent erasure: a faint stick figure pouring a jet of water over the name on the roof of the barn; bold scribbles of wind about to blow away the name in the clouds; a pair of scissors already beginning to cut off the name drawn on paper. There is a stylish economy about these drawings that enrich the written words by discovering, each time, their exact visual equivalent. The verbal and the visual combine to produce the text; it takes the two of them to define its meaning.

One detail, in particular, dramatises the equation of word and image: the rose that Christian has drawn below the title on the title page. He draws it again, clutched in the hand on the final page of the story. It is as if the rose symbolises the story's theme which, after all, is linked to Orlando's verses by its eventual witness to the narrator's love. The passage of the rose, from title page to story's end, signifies the narrator's quest for the meaning of the name and forms a visual bond between the beginning and ending of the narrative. The destiny of the rose finds fulfillment in the loved one's hand.

There is an enviable lightness about this story, a spontaneous subtlety, nowhere more noteworthy than in the placing of the treasured name within the tale. The name Leslie never appears within the written text. Indeed, if we were to print out the story, minus the images, we would never discover the loved one's name. It is cited only within the visual narrative, written in the red barn, the blue sky, the blue paper and on the brown arm. It is the principal word in the story, the name of the person to whom the story is addressed, the owner of 'your name,' but Christian has excluded it from the written text and revealed it only by way of his drawings. The effect is to exploit the formal possibilities of the picture story, highlighting the isolation of the treasured name while underlining the critical interdependence of word and image within the total narrative. Words and images are as inseparable as name and person.

In a late essay, Rudolf Arnheim describes children's drawings as so many 'ways of coping with the human condition by means of significant form.' Christian's playful picture book is a striking example, light in tone but with

what Italo Calvino, in his essay on the literary value of lightness, in his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, calls 'the lightness of thoughtfulness.' Calvino speaks of the 'existential function' of literature and associates it with 'the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living.' Christian's story however might as readily be seen as a search for weight. It is the story of how to ground a name, a quest for its living reality, its essence. The lightness of the story lies in the delicacy of its form, its fanciful play with the relation of word to object, or language to life.

Calvino contrasts 'the lightness of thoughtfulness' with 'the lightness of frivolity' but frivolity, too, may prove thoughtful, in its challenge to weight, and thoughtful frivolity brings me to my third and final story.

THREE

One year after I retired as headteacher of Harwell School, I had to go into hospital for a hip-replacement operation. While I was there one of my Harwell friends and colleagues sent me a pile of her pupils' work to cheer me up. 'I'm sure reading the children's poems and stories will aid recuperation!' she wrote. Three or four days later I received a second letter.

*Dear Michael,
I had to send you this piece, written in a spare 15 minutes! by Jack Dixon. It really needs to be read aloud. I asked him to write and explain his thinking, hence his letter – not that it clarifies much! He started off calling it a story, then a poem, and now calls it his concept... Jenny*

Jack was ten years old and in his final year at primary school. Before I read his story, poem, or concept, – in the event it turned out to be all three – I read Jack's letter, which was, in effect, an eccentric introduction to his tale. This is what he wrote.

*Dear Mr Armstrong,
Good morning, Good afternoon, Good evening witch ever
time you recive this letter, and firstly I'd like to say
congradulations for the good opperation. More to the point, inclosed
whith this letter is a story, or a poem. It is about here there,
if is, not, probably or maby. The thinking behind it was enspired
by the 1, the only J.R.R.Tolkein, auther of my favorite
book the hobbit, wich I am now about to finush for
the 5th time. It is about, (Oh yes, this is the poem I'm blabing
on about now) It is about here or there, mabe it is or isn't,
flibedy widgets and what d'you call that's
and other strange names, because I'm me. Jack Dixon.
The great thinker-upper of discombobulated and
maker upper of woballonongg. So, befor reading
this make sure you take ae big breath and
prepare to be*

discombobulated!

from

Jack Dixon

*P.S. Class five are thinking of a plan to
sneak you into Harwell school, remember, keep
it under your hat!*

I will return to this letter shortly but first I want you to hear the story. Already the letter had indeed discombobulated me – but, as you will see, the story was still more disconcerting.

THE ARKENCHRIST

By Jack Dixon

Hundreds upon thousands upon hundreds of years ago, lived some flibbetywidges, or they could be called whatdomacallits, thingammybobs, whatdyacallthats. They are things you lost, things you forgot, things you're thinking or things YOU'LL never think of but someone else will. And the oldest thing, not living, not thinking, never sleeping, never waking, most powerful of all but has none, is the ARKENCHRIST: given by the sun to the moon and back again, given from the hot to the cold and given away again, given from dark to light, to night, to day, to something else, then given to oblivion, to apocalypse, to Beauty, then to here. Nowhere is here but somewhere is as well. Are you here? For I'm not. Or maybe I am. I don't know where here is, but not here, or is it? I am here. Or not. Or maybe, Or no. Or maybe I know where I am. May it be here, there, hither or thither. I'm always where I am, or not. Somewhere, nowhere, could it or not, a thing, a flibbetywidge lives here, no matter where here is, it lives, or does it? Is it here? No, or yes, definitely, or sorry, Bub, no one home? It's probably dead, but lives, he, she it, something, flibbetywidge or not, lives inside us.

What are we to make of this wild tale? Jack's letter may not clarify much, as Jenny claimed, but it offers a number of clues. The letter echoes the story, inasmuch as it is written in the same tone of voice, that of a self-confident trickster determined to present his credentials. So much is clear from the continuous verbal play, beginning with the alternative greetings in the opening sentence – 'Good morning, Good afternoon, Good evening' – and ending with the favourite word which Jack had discovered, 'discombobulated', and which he now places in the centre of its own separate line in enlarged script, like a signature. He names his inspiration as J.R.R. Tolkien, and in particular his book *The Hobbit*. There are few direct traces of *The Hobbit* in Jack's story except for his borrowing of the first half of the name Arkenstone, the fabulous jewel that appears in the final stages of Bilbo Baggins' adventure. But the story shares Tolkien's fondness for riddles and enigmas. Moreover, by juxtaposing, within a few lines the two names 'J.R.R. Tolkien, author of my favourite book' and 'me. Jack Dixon' Jack implies, if not an equivalence, at least a mutual solidarity as authors and wordsmiths. It's as if Jack is simultaneously acknowledging his

inheritance, as a reader, and asserting his originality, as a fellow writer. The subject of the story, Jack tells us, is to be found in the play with contraries of space and existence – ‘it is about here or there, maybe it is or isn’t.’ and about ‘strange names’ such as ‘flibedy widgets’ and ‘whatdoyoucallthats’, names that he, ‘the great thinker upper of discombobulated and maker-upper of woballonongg’ has invented or discovered. The intention is to surprise, provoke, amaze – ‘prepare to be **discombobulated**.’ With this one word, highlighted on the page, Jack announces himself as a trickster and to prove the point he adds a postscript below his signature, hinting at class five’s secret plan, doubtless of his own making.

The self-confidence with which Jack introduces his tale is all the more remarkable inasmuch as the story that follows sets out to undermine this very self-confidence. ‘I’m me. Jack Dixon,’ runs Jack’s letter, and the full stop after the word ‘me’ dramatises the writer’s self-assurance by turning the name into a sentence so that the name asserts its own existence. But now look what happens in the story. ‘I am here. Or not. Or maybe. Or no.’ The letter I is underlined in an attempt to give it more weight but the self-assertion is immediately questioned. Indeed the underlining of I seems itself an expression of doubt, a futile emphasis on the ego. Perhaps only a confident writer could write so unsettling a tale; perhaps doubt is the obverse of every trickster’s self-confidence.

Let’s turn to the story itself. It’s a sure sign of Jack’s self-consciousness as a writer that he chose to call his piece alternately a story, a poem and a concept. The work cuts across conventional genres. It is part narrative, part lyric, part meditation but the three aspects are entirely interdependent. That the piece should resist classification seems appropriate, granted that uncertainty is its theme. Jack is playing with genre in order to explore ideas. Unlike Christian his aim is not to seek closure but to open up speculation. His motive is the pleasure of play itself, a delight that implies what Keats called ‘Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ [I wonder, incidentally, what Jack would have made of the words ‘negative capability’ if I had thought to ask him.]

‘ Hundreds upon thousands upon hundreds of years ago, lived some flibbedywidgets, or they could be called whatdomacallits, thingammybobs, whatdyacallthat’s.’ With the mocking indecisiveness of this introduction Jack subverts the other worldly simplicity of once upon a time, almost as if he is consciously challenging the world of his hero Tolkein whose novel *The Hobbit* opens with matter of fact succinctness: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.’ I looked up in the Oxford English Dictionary the word ‘flibbertigibbet’ from which Jack’s name ‘flibeddywidgets’ presumably derives, hoping for a clue to the story’s significance. The meanings listed include ‘a gossip or chatterer,’ ‘a flighty, irresponsible, or frivolous person,’ ‘an impish, mischievous child,’ ‘a restless person.’ These several definitions perfectly match Jack’s story and its tricky narrator, not to mention Jack himself, the corresponding author, and I

doubt whether this is by chance. The last three words of the story tell us that the flibbetywidget 'lives inside us,' suggesting that the narrator identifies whatever the flibbetywidget – 'he, she it, something, flibbetywidget or not' – may be, with his own flighty and mischievous character. There is an impish restlessness in the shape and substance of the writing that mimics the flibbetywidget's nature, made up, as it is, of discarded fragments of thought and memory, the mind's litter as it were – 'things you lost, things you forgot, things you're thinking, or things YOU'll never think of but someone else will.'. What could be more restless than the profusion of punctuation, itself a litter of commas, full stops, question marks, words capitalised or underlined; or than the short, stuttering sentences, many of them without verbs; or than the endless contradictions, uncertainties, assertions immediately followed by negations; or than the puzzling maze of thought. Not that the writing is itself indecisive. On the contrary, indecision is portrayed with a notable clarity and drama.

At the centre of the story we find the titular figure of the Arkenchrist, the mysterious equivalent of Tolkein's Arkenstone. The sentence that announces the Arkenchrist is by far the longest in the story, three times as long as any other, a weighty utterance indeed. This is no accident. The Arkenchrist, a creature that seems to have a distant affinity to Tennyson's *Kraken*, is the mythical figure, a Sphinx of sorts, who presides over the unresolved riddle of the narrative, and the long, slow sentence with its dramatic phrasing and its deliberate division into two segments by means of the colon after the capitalised name, is craftily designed to evoke the Arkenchrist's grand, if obscure, significance, Powerful but passive, the Arkenchrist is passed around the universe from end to end, for ever given away, given back or handed on. It belongs with the flibbetywidgets in some way, 'the oldest thing of all,' as if it is their source and inspiration. Its erratic journey across the physical and mental universe, from planet to planet and abstraction to abstraction finally lands it in the here and now, as if this was always the goal, and it is this puzzle of the here and now, of place and identity, that the story finally identifies as the Arkenchrist's riddle. Where is here, am I here, can I know where I am? The story makes no attempt to resolve the metaphysical questions it so deftly poses. The questions proliferate, take flight, circling endlessly in the philosophical universe. Like the Sphinx, the story refuses interpretation. Its mischievous secret is to set us thinking, wondering what it all might mean, questioning the apparent certainties of place and identity. The words 'I am', like the word 'here', recur again and again in the second half of the story. Each time they are immediately challenged. In the end we are left, not with the confidence of 'I am' but with whatever 'he, she, it, flibberdywidget or not, lives inside us,' the 'I' finally enlarged to 'us', to embrace the reader no less than the writer. The tale seems to be telling us that the flibbetywidgets and ourselves are one, that our subjectivity is suspect, that the stray thoughts that prey on us are all that we can count on to resolve the riddle of existence. Or not.

In his introduction to the art of inventing stories, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, the Italian author Gianni Rodari discusses the widespread appeal of riddles to

children. ‘Why do children like riddles so much?’ Rodari asks. ‘My hunch is that it is because they represent the concentrated form – and are somewhat emblematical – of their experience of conquering reality. For a child, the world is full of mysterious objects, incomprehensible events, and indecipherable figures. Their own presence in the world is a mystery to be resolved, a riddle to solve, and they circle round it with direct or indirect questions.’ Jack’s literary play may be read as a late and self-consciously emblematical example. His speculation has a poetry all its own, an artistry that is anticipated by the capitalisation of the word beauty in the central sentence: ‘Nowhere is here but somewhere is as well. Are you here? For I’m not. Or maybe I am.. I don’t know where here is, but not here, or is it? I am here. Or not. Or maybe. Or no. Or maybe I know where I am. May it be here, there, hither or thither. I’m always where I am, or not.’ The rhythms and echoes of the language cast a spell over the narrative which almost comes to a halt before the mystery of the Or. There is a wonderful play on words, as for instance the pun on ‘no’ and ‘know’, which seems worthy of Samuel Beckett, or the lengthening of ‘maybe’ into ‘may it be’. The haunting music of Jack’s language is what, I think, my colleague, Jack’s teacher, had in mind when she wrote of Jack’s poem that ‘it really needs to be read aloud.’ In this too, as also in the absence of plot, it resembles one of Beckett’s late narratives. William Blake wrote that ‘without contraries is no progression’ but in Jack’s tale the contraries circle around each other, suspended as in a musical pause, without ever reaching forward: ‘No, or yes, definitely, or sorry, Bub, no one home?’ The question mark after ‘home’ throws into doubt the very possibility of resolution. It seems that Jack’s narrator, unlike Christian’s, despairs of ever reaching home, finding himself. As for ‘Bub’, the OED defines the word as ‘boy, man, brother; used chiefly as a familiar form of address.’ For Jack, who capitalises the word, it seems to stand for Everyman, drawing all of us into the narrator’s predicament.

Jack’s tale is a formidably eccentric example of how a ten year old child, close to the end of childhood – Jack moved on to secondary school at the end of the year in question – continues to play with words, configuring his own experience through verbal experiment, and in the process re-configuring his inheritance. For all its circularity, there is a revolutionary drama about Jack’s experimental narrative. He absorbs the work of others, of Tolkien for example, by responding with work of his own. His strange, original narrative appropriates the tradition out of which it arises, recasting it to suit his own playful goals. We may be certain that Jack has a future with his words, but more than that, his words guarantee a future for words themselves. He is reviving language in the act of acquiring it.

+++

All three of the children’s works which I have presented can claim to be unique but that doesn’t mean that they are unusual. On the contrary they are characteristic of what children can achieve once they are given the opportunity

at school to play, that is to say, to imagine, invent, speculate; once, in short, we recognise, with Vivian Paley, that play is a child's work. The implications for education of taking play seriously are revolutionary. Play moves from the periphery of the classroom to its centre. It is no longer to be seen as a decorative extra, or as a useful adjunct to the school's economic and social purposes, but as fundamental to individual and collective growth. It is the means by which children acquire skill by confronting tradition; it affects, profoundly, the form and content of the curriculum; it lies at the heart of assessment and accountability. These are large issues and I don't have space to explore them here, but I do want briefly to consider four of the ways in which the cultural significance of play revolutionises classroom practice: four values which playfulness calls for.

First the value of empathy, the sympathetic identification of the reader, whether teacher or fellow pupil, with the writer's work. Empathy is the necessary condition of interpretation, the common source of our understanding of children's artistic play. To play is to make-believe and unless we believe in what we have made or what others have made, or unless, as Coleridge famously put it, we suspend our disbelief, we cannot make play make sense. To appreciate works such as Jack's story or Christian's lyrical ballad we have to live within their worlds of form and feeling, making those worlds imaginatively our own. We have to hear the trickster's voice, the lover's complaint; sense the earnestness within Jack's mockery, the thoughtfulness within Christian's lightness; allow ourselves to be caught in Jack's web of assertion and negation, in the drama of Christian's quest for the meaning of a name.

Next the value of openness, above all the value of time and space to develop your own thought. In her letter to me, accompanying Jack's story, Jenny Giles mentioned that the piece had been written 'in a spare 15 minutes.' The speed with which Jack composed his story is surprising but what interests me more is that word 'spare.' There is precious little spare time in contemporary primary schools, or indeed, according to recent research, in many children's home lives either. In a context in which teachers are expected to write on the whiteboard every day the objective of that day's lesson, the very idea of openness is discounted. Yet day-dreaming, doodling, pursuing an accidental train of thought, trying out the strangest ideas, improvising, wasting time, as teachers might be inclined to say: all of this is essential to the life of play. Jack's story may have been among the most significant he wrote in primary school yet it emerged out of nowhere in a few minutes of spare time. Out of nowhere – the story's very own theme. Similarly, Sheila Barry's on the spot decision to abandon the day's objective in order to make the most of one child's personal initiative gave impetus to a sudden outpouring of creativity within her class of third graders. Once again I am reminded of John Keats who dedicated one of the finest of all his letters to the virtues of what he called 'diligent indolence', a listening, brooding emptiness which is often the source of our deepest reflection. 'Let us not,' he wrote to his friend Reynolds, 'go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a

knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive – budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit.’ Jack took the hint with a narrative that wrestles in playful earnest with the grandest of philosophical themes, the nature of existence; Christian took the hint with a heartfelt meditation on naming. Their achievements depended on the space they were given in which to experiment, to play, the opportunity to turn away from ‘a knowledge of what is to be arrived at,’ and respond to the improvisatory moment.

The third value I want to draw attention to is the value of conversation, by which I mean the informal exchange of ideas and experience. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott once described conversation as ‘an unrehearsed intellectual adventure’ and that is how I like to think of conversation as between children and teachers in a classroom in which play lies at the centre. Conversation is the appropriate form for the critical scrutiny of play. It is the way in which we learn from each other’s inventiveness, the way in which we recognise how verbal or visual art relate to reality, the way in which we come to share an understanding of the human condition.

When I think of conversation in the setting of the classroom, one particular scene springs to mind. It happened in the year 2005 when I spent four weeks as a participant observer in Mary Guerrero’s fourth grade classroom in Lawrence. Mary was working on a creative arts project, in collaboration with a photographer, a museum director, and myself, studying the home and the city through a combination of photography, creative and reflective writing, and exploratory trips around the city of Lawrence. An important part of the project was an adaptation of what in England we call circle time. Several times each week the children would sit in a circle around the classroom carpet, with Mary and any of her helpers who were present, while one child read her or his writing, or displayed a photograph or other artwork. After the reading there would be a pause of between five and ten minutes during which everyone would think about what had been read or seen and scribble down a few ideas. Then each child in the circle would, in turn, point to some detail they noticed in the work, the teachers too, after which a general discussion would begin, often lasting for the best part of an hour. There was no final goal and no attempt was made to judge the work under review. The aim was to enter the world of the work, to think about what it might mean, to ask questions and to respond with one’s own experience and insight. These conversations, for that is how we saw them, became, again and again, the highpoint of the day, a playful, thoughtful time when nothing was at stake except the satisfaction of the experience itself, the pleasure of exchange, of listening and responding, and the knowledge that you never knew where the conversation might lead, what truths it might uncover. The children’s absorption reminded me of that other prized moment in a primary school day when the children, at the end of the day, gather round their teacher to listen to her read them a story. But then, at its best, storytime is itself a form of play.

And so to the fourth value, the value of documentation, of 'making learning visible', to cite the title of the fascinating study of the work of Reggio Emilia's pre-schools conducted by Reggio Children in collaboration with Harvard's Project Zero. The word 'learning' has a double meaning. It refers both to the acquisition of knowledge and to the knowledge acquired, as when we speak of a man or woman of learning. It is the second of these meanings that I want to emphasize. Children have a wealth of learning to convey even as they are themselves in the process of learning. Indeed the process of learning can often be seen as the articulation of their learning, their wisdom. So Jack, in writing his story, is finding out for himself and telling us, his readers, something of what he knows, about the riddling nature of life, about certainty and doubt, about how to express his thought in measured prose. To read his story, to enter its strange new world, is to come to understand the world a little differently, to find new life in words. It is the same with Christian. In telling us what he knows of the power of a name through an intricate blend of word and image he is giving us fresh insight both into naming and into the relationship of visual thought to verbal thought.

A school which supports and celebrates children's learning, a school where play lies at the centre, may be seen as a major cultural site, a setting in which culture is both absorbed and created, acquired and exchanged. Making learning visible is not, then, simply a matter of documenting the process of learning, important as that is, but of presenting children's learning to themselves, their teachers, parents and local communities, as the children's own contribution to the culture in which they are growing up, a contribution which alternately delights, surprises, challenges and shocks us. The school becomes an art gallery, an exhibition hall, a library, a stage, a concert platform, a studio, a lecture theatre, a laboratory, in which the students' works, the products of their play, offer us their own perspective on language, life and culture. Of course, product and process are inseparable; making children's works visible is at once a recognition of children's learning and an incitement to new learning.

I will end where I began, with the philosophy of play. In a more recent book, *The Conversation of Humanity*, Stephen Mulhall argues that 'part of what is involved in coming to understand and to achieve aesthetic education,' or what I would call the pedagogy of the imagination, 'is cultivating the ability to mean words otherwise – to find contexts and modes of employment that reveal the limitations of common use and the possibility of uncommon but revealing alternatives.' This, Mullhall suggests, is how Friedrich Schiller thought about what he called the play-drive, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, composed some 150 years before Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The ability to mean words otherwise is just what Jack's story, Christian's lyrical ballad, the repartee of those two galloping five year olds, demonstrate. The revolution I look forward to, in our schools, is one that places this ability and its cultivation foremost among the aims and values which the school serves, a key to everything else. Play would really then become every child's work.

References

- Arnheim, Rudolf (2006) in J. Fineberg (Ed.) *When We Were Young*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press.
- Calvino, Italo (1988) *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Keats, John (1970) *Letters of John Keats* (R. Gittings, Ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mulhall, Stephen (2001) *Inheritance and Originality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mulhall, Stephen (2007) *The Conversation of Humanity*. Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press.
- Paley, Vivian (2004) *A Child's Work*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Reggio Children & Project Zero (2001) *Making Learning Visible*. Reggio Children Publications.
- Rodari, Gianni (1996) *The Grammar of Fantasy*. New York: Teachers & Writers.
- Tolkein, J.R.R. (1998) *The Hobbit*. London: Harper Collins.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1972) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG is the author of two studies of children's thinking: *Closely Observed Children* and *Children Writing Stories*. He has written numerous essays for *FORUM* and is chairperson of the Editorial Board. For 19 years he was headteacher of Harwell Primary School in Oxfordshire, and before that he taught at Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire and at Wandsworth Comprehensive School in London. Each summer he teaches courses on narrative and on the imagination at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, USA. *Correspondence:* michael.armstrong@logic-net.co.uk

