

## EDITORIAL

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*Christine Clegg, Vicky Lebeau, and Paul Myerscough*

What is so real as the cry of a child?  
A rabbit's cry may be wilder  
But it has no soul.

*Sylvia Plath*<sup>1</sup>

When I am confronted, via reports, pictures, personal notice, of the infliction of wanton pain on children and on animals, a despairing rage floods me.

*George Steiner*<sup>2</sup>

Yesterday I attended a meeting where, as is to be expected, the death of narrative was scholastically announced once more, but more as good news than as disaster. When I hear this, I am enraged. They might as well announce that childhood is dead or, more appalling, that all the children are dead ...

*J. B. Pontalis*<sup>3</sup>

At all costs the true world of childhood must prevail, must be restored; that world whose momentous, heroic, mysterious quality is fed on airy nothings, whose substance is so ill-fitted to withstand the touch of adult inquisition.

*Jean Cocteau*<sup>4</sup>

What children know about adults is not always pleasant.

*Anne Higonet*<sup>5</sup>

Historically and culturally, the child is a complex and overdetermined figure. Deeply invested with individual and collective fantasies and anxieties devolving upon the past, present and future, the child bears an impossible burden of representation. At the same time, and in different ways, every individual child faces the exigencies of growing up, of living in and through the childhood into which they are born. 'They fuck you up/your mum and dad,' wrote Phillip Larkin, famously, as if anticipating one contemporary image of childhood in ruins: children as victims of more or less lethal forms of family and cultural life.

For, as we know, not all children survive childhood. Amongst other things, the visceral reaction to the recent abduction and murder of Sarah Payne

1. Sylvia Plath (1965), 'Kindness', *Ariel*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, p83.

2. George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life*, Phoenix, London 1998, p168.

3. J.-B. Pontalis, *Love of Beginnings*, James Greene with Marie-Christine Réguis (trans), foreword by Adam Phillips, Free Association Books, London 1993, p149.

4. Jean Cocteau (1929), *Les Enfants Terribles*, Rosamund Lehmann (trans) (1955), Penguin, Harmondsworth 1961, p20.

5. Anne Higonet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, Thames and Hudson, London 1998, p213.

6. *Ibid.*, p224.

demonstrated a need both to protect the image of the child as sacred and to safeguard children against the possibilities of real and imagined danger from adults identified as perverse. The death of this little girl has brought into sharp focus the problem of locating the boundaries between child and adult, childhood and adulthood. Attempts are made to disentangle the rights of children from the rights and responsibilities of adults. If 'we can be absolutely sure of one thing,' writes Anne Higonnet, it is that 'children are not responsible for the society into which they are born'.<sup>6</sup> But if 'responsibility' marks a vital difference between child and adult (the one thing 'we can be absolutely sure of'), does this necessarily mean that it can also provide the categorical basis for a progressive and desirable legislation? And can the differences between child and adult, childhood and adulthood, be properly conceived in any case, given the tensions between 'the child' imagined and reproduced in a matrix of representations - cultural, social, legal - on the one hand, and the lived experience of children as social beings on the other? Public demands to 'know' the identities and whereabouts of adults 'shamed' as the predominant social threat to children are forged in the abiding image of childhood as a sacred space *within the family*. But, unsurprisingly, the clamour of recrimination drowns those voices expressing the view that such knowledge will do nothing to make more secure a nation of families in which many children do not live happily ever after. Temporarily shadowed by these concerns for children in need of protection from perverse adults, recent years have also witnessed the return of the murderous child, a child who appears to ruin the idea of childhood for adults, at the same time posing one more critical question about the child's ontological, 'social and legal status: when is a child not, or no longer, a child? Or, more precisely, when *does* a child become 'responsible' for the world he or she inhabits?

In gathering together this collection of articles we hope to suggest new avenues for pursuing the idea of childhood, and the place of children, with particular regard to difficult questions of representation and cultural diversity. As editors, we wanted to bring different historical and cultural perspectives into dialogue with one another, and to provide a space for the drawing of connections between diverse fields of inquiry. Although the articles assembled here address a range of cultural and textual materials, a number of common themes and questions have emerged: is it possible to talk about children without talking about adults? Is it possible to talk about children without addressing adult fantasies of childhood, and adult memories of being a child? Of central concern, we have remarked already, are the boundaries constructed between adults and children, adulthood and childhood. Where, for example, do we place the real or imagined states of infancy and adolescence on the continuum from babyhood to adulthood? Reformulating our earlier question, when is an adult no longer constituted by the demands of the child he or she once was?

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Adam Phillips has been reading Louis Althusser's autobiography, and in

'Children Again', the essay that introduces this collection, he contemplates psychoanalytic narratives of childhood. 'Is it possible after psychoanalysis, or indeed after Rousseau,' asks Phillips, 'to think of anything in adulthood that doesn't seem to have its prototype in childhood ... or anything in childhood that cannot be described as a precursor (a formative link) of significant, or even trivial adult experience?' Phillips goes on to suggest that 'by making adults essentially children', psychoanalysis seems to dissolve the boundaries between adulthood and childhood. At the same time, we are reminded that the 'child' in psychoanalysis is no ordinary child, since, in theory and practice, psychoanalysis can only present us with 'childhood as trauma'. Decisively, for Phillips, this is not the whole story: there are stories about childhood that remain untold, at least in psychoanalysis, not because what happens is grievously unspeakable, but because what happens is the *ordinary* stuff of childhood experience and is not, therefore, regarded as 'significant'.

As one of the most powerful narratives of childhood in the twentieth century, psychoanalysis is the object of inquiry for other papers in this collection. In 'Another Child of Violence', Vicky Lebeau takes an early case study of a young boy as a starting point for thinking about 'the child as a figure of, and for, anxiety in psychoanalysis'. Focusing on the representation of 'the child's fears of death and blackness', and the ways in which these might be connected to the figure of the mother, Lebeau goes on to discuss the concept of phobia in Freud. Crucially, Lebeau's essay addresses the cultural implications of a psychic structure in which 'a black child' may function as a 'figure of unwantedness' for children who experience the world as 'anxiety and impingement'. In her analysis of the idea of 'unwantedness' in relation to 'blackness', Lebeau is in dialogue with the American critical legal theorist, Patricia Williams. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, Williams connects the status of children with the depredations of poverty and the 'spirit murder' of racism. For Williams, rights of protection and due regard may be largely unavailable to children: like the poor, they have nothing to bargain with. 'What would a child have to introduce as currency', she asks, 'by which care of the state would be made a right?'<sup>7</sup> Williams is referring here to deep-rooted forms of social neglect and disregard, both witting and unwitting, of those 'subjects' who cannot afford the price of entry into the social. It is specifically in the context of rights and ideas of the self that Williams insists on the connection between racism and other abuses:

It is essential that the self be permitted to retreat into itself and make its own decisions with self-love and self-confidence. What links child abuse, the mistreatment of women, and racism is the massive external intrusion into psyche that dominating powers impose to keep the self from ever fully seeing itself.<sup>8</sup>

7. Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, p35.

8. *Ibid.*, p63.

Two of the articles in this collection open up intricate ways of thinking

about the creative potential to transform 'experiential knowledge' (to borrow Williams's expression) in relation to representations of racism and sexual violence. Both David Marriott and Tanya Horeck are engaged with questions concerning the practice of fiction as a means of negotiating the conditions of a childhood which, for different reasons, was not 'good enough'.

In "'The Derived Life of Fiction": Race, Childhood and Culture', David Marriott discusses the remarkable collaboration in mid-twentieth-century America between the novelist Richard Wright, and the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham. Undertaking a detailed elaboration of 'their shared preoccupation with the vicissitudes of fiction and therapy, race and crime', Marriott's essay addresses the urgent question of what it has meant - indeed, what it means - to grow up in a racist culture as a black child. Central to Marriott's account, in particular of Wright's fiction as a 'cure' for what childhood had in store, is an examination of the figure of the mother as the embodiment of the *effects* of the 'massive invasion of self' that racism perpetrates. Who, the question is begged, is responsible for what happens to black children? What are the 'real' costs of mothering and fathering in racist cultures?

In, "'Let Me Tell You a Story": Writing the Fiction of Childhood in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*', Tanya Horeck focuses on the image of 'the abused child as storyteller'. Through a close analysis of the links and dislocations between fantasy, fiction and sexual violation in Allison's novel, Horeck argues for a more complex reading of the difficult relationship between childhood/adolescent sexuality and narratives of child sexual abuse. One of the implications to be drawn from Horeck's essay is that not all children have a childhood. Nevertheless, she uncovers the ways in which both fantasy and the practice of fiction may offer an otherwise denied 'space of self-preservation'.

In the form of a letter, Marian Partington's autobiographical account of her experience as a bereaved sister discusses the difficulty of reconciling her memories of a middle-class literary childhood with the literal facts of the abduction and murder of Lucy Partington by Fred and Rosemary West. Reflecting on different formations of childhood in Britain in the 1970s, and implicitly questioning conceptions of class, culture and 'upbringing', the essay draws out the uncanny connections and brutal disparities between one rural childhood and another. Partington is also concerned with the place and status of literature in relation to childhood. In this instance, we are asked to consider the restorative, creative force of literature, and poetry in particular, as well as the limits of its ability to save life.

The essays by Horeck and Partington draw attention to the question of how children survive (and therefore grow up in) family circumstances of extreme torment. The passage from childhood to adulthood, however, is never one of simple transformation between two states of being, or two statuses of recognition. The child is always defined by *relation*, 'one's son or daughter (at any age)'. The meaning is clear enough. On entering puberty (or whatever bodily sign or cultural variable is used to mark the moment)

we may leave childhood behind, but not the possibility of being recast as a child. And, as Adam Phillips shows, it is not just in definition that the child and adult seem to resist separation. Adults may be reconstituted as children through parental bonds and dispensations, and officially by dint of marginality, insanity, or criminality. At the heart of legal and social conceptions of the progression from child to adult is a notion of self-determination, and the acquisition and expression of certain rights. The right to vote, for example, is central to a certain idea of not being a child, or conversely being like a child in the eyes of the state. And yet, as David Archard suggests in the context of legal and cultural theories of rights, if 'competence' or 'minimal rationality' is of democratic concern, then, clearly, there are 'children' who could exercise those qualities.<sup>9</sup> And, just as clearly, there are adults whose ability to exercise those qualities is deeply questionable.

With regard to sexual rights, the idea of 'competence' is attended by controversy, and not just because of its self-evident historical and cultural variability. For Archard, it seems, the competence required for sexual determination rests upon a degree of 'appropriate knowledge'. The paradox is obvious: children are not ready for sex until they 'know' what they are doing, but children are seen as unready to 'know' about sex until they are regarded as ready for sex. The deployment of 'knowledge' as a legal or constitutional category is fraught with difficulty. What kind of knowledge is required? How would it be recognised? And what relation do questions of sexual knowledge and sexual competence bear to that other unfathomably difficult category, consent? 'Children', of course, are deemed incapable of consent. For a child, in the context of the law, not consenting is not the same as saying 'no', since consent cannot be given or refused. But missing, here, is the idea that consent - the possibility of saying yes or no - has its meaning within the context of a relation. Something is being consented to (or not consented to) with another, to whom 'the child', in law, is granted no response.

We have already touched on the question of boundaries in relation to the rights of children and the rights and responsibilities of adults. But there is something more to be said here about the apparent rift between, on the one hand, the public reaction to children at the mercy of adult sexual desires, and on the other, academic discourses on the subject of childhood. Of central concern, here, is a certain mode of analysis of childhood, and the figure of the child, as cultural constructions producing and reproducing an adult desire for innocence. To be sure, the circulation of fantasies of childhood - there is a manifest private and public investment in images of children - can be understood as nostalgia, some small compensation to adult subjects for having grown up. However, when fantasies of 'childhood' (one's own or another's, the distinction is never clear) and the preoccupation with innocence (eroticised or not) demand the embodied presence of a real child (preferably an 'innocent'), there is a pressing need to address difficult

9. David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, Routledge, London 1993.

questions concerning the relationship between desire and its enactment, as well as the place of adult authority in the making and unmaking of sexual boundaries between adults and children. In *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority (1780-1930)*, Carolyn Steedman urges caution against the deconstructive tendencies of textual readings of childhood:

Literary analysis allows the child to be understood as an intricate matter of adult projection and desire, and once this is done James Kincaid's conclusion in *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992), that the child 'is not, in itself, anything', is very easy to reach (and quite irresponsible proposals may follow on it). ... children were *both* the repositories of adults' desires (or a text, to be 'written' and 'rewritten', to use a newer language), *and* social beings ...<sup>10</sup>

10. Steedman describes Kincaid's proposals as 'indecent'. Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority (1780-1930)*, Virago, London 1995, pp96-97. James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, Routledge, New York 1992.

Although Steedman is referring to the representation of children in history, her argument clarifies and contextualises a critical disjunction in recent debates about representations of childhood. For this reason it resonates with a number of the articles collected here. The cultural texts and histories discussed by Vincent Quinn, Lindsay Smith, and Christine Clegg are engaged in different ways with 'adult projections and desires'. Each of these articles is concerned to explore the structures of fantasy at work in adult desires for close relations with children. At the same time, they share an interest in the language of authority, and its powerful impositions in relation to the desirability and 'acquisition' of children.

In 'Fostering the Nation: Patrick Pearse and Pedagogy', Vincent Quinn explores the place of boys ('namely a love of boys') in the writing of Patrick Pearse, founding principal of St Enda's School for Boys. Through a suggestive reading of the images of spectatorship in Pearse's writings, Quinn uncovers connections between 'the patriotic and the erotic' and draws attention to the fantasies of control underpinning Pearse's idea of fosterage, as well as his vision for an Irish nation. One implication of Quinn's discussion is that innocence is both eroticised and perpetuated in the fixing of the figure of the child.

Lindsay Smith is also concerned with the idea of fixation in relation to adult preoccupations with, and representations of children. In her essay 'Infantia', Smith focuses on the importance of 'the figure of the little girl' to John Ruskin and Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). Her finely detailed examination of the coincidence of two nineteenth-century instances - Dodgson's fascination with his child-friend Gertrude Chataway, and Ruskin's obsessive interest in Vittore Carpaccio's painting 'The Dream of St. Ursula' - uncovers a complex longing for infancy 'as a state more "pure", more desired, than the state of childhood itself.' The significance of this state for the desiring adult is that it constitutes a wish for speechlessness in the body of a growing child, which thereby comes to figure an impossible tension

between the opposing states of inarticulacy and articulate speech.

Christine Clegg is also concerned with the problems attending adult fantasies of intimacy with girls. In her essay on Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and a related short story 'The Enchanter', she identifies the problem of representation in Nabokov's writing with the ways in which his girl 'characters' are taken to 'fix' the meaning of innocence. 'Lolita' circulates way beyond the novel's text, both as a familiar label for a 'knowing' girl, and as a generic description for an item of child pornography. In focusing on the obsession with innocence in the critical reception of Nabokov's work, Clegg uncovers the ways in which his narratives of seduction dissolve the boundaries between the family man and the perverse outsider.

Sebastian Mitchell's essay is engaged with recent debates about innocence and the figure of 'the knowing child', especially in relation to historical formations of adult subjectivity. Considering a range of visual and textual images of children in the eighteenth century, particularly the figure of the chimney sweep, Mitchell's paper examines the ideological and social implications of the representation of poor children. Like Lindsay Smith, Mitchell also draws attention to the structures of repetition and fixation in artistic compositions, in this instance tracing the visual transformations of the social status of the 'little girl', and the ways in which that transformation might be related to the corruption of innocence - 'an indication of the sexual vulnerability of poor children' - in Joshua Reynolds's versions of 'The Strawberry Girl'. In different ways, Mitchell and Smith both infer that visual images of children raise questions as to the rights and respect accorded to real children who are standing in (at times laboriously) for the imagined children of their adult creators.

What would it mean to insist on respect for the state of being a child? What form might such respect take? David Archard argues that the particular instance of familial abuse of children entails a distinctive failure in responsible parenting. But how are we to imagine a contract of responsibility in regard to parenting? Certainly, all forms of violence against children indicate a failure in the facilitating environment. But any imagined - imaginary - contract of respect for and responsibility towards children would involve both more and less than that environment. Responsibility entails a duty of care for a dependent child, but also constitutes respect for the child's moving towards independence and adulthood. If the notion of parental responsibility invites discussion about the social duty of care - welfare, education and citizenship - it also returns us to a consideration of maturity and competence, and thence to the disputed borders of childhood and adulthood. In an attempt to conceptualise the failure of responsibility towards children, Archard invokes a Winnicottian vision of primary care: 'Children are abused if they do not get an upbringing which is good enough'.<sup>11</sup> But in a genuinely inclusive notion of care, the idea of 'upbringing' cannot be contained by the figure of the mother. How are we to understand, for example, the place of the good enough father, and beyond this, perhaps, the good enough

11. Archard, *op. cit.*, p154.

society?

The representations discussed in this issue invite a further connection concerning the ways in which children enter the social world. In the closing essay of the collection, 'The Necessary Privations of Growing Up', Stephanie Hemelryk Donald addresses the complex relations between privacy and sociality, and the strategies entailed in the movement from the one state to the other. Central to Donald's discussion of what it means to become an adult - 'When do we grow up?' - is her engagement with Hannah Arendt's understanding of the social, and the demands of the nation state. Taking as her object of inquiry an 'imaginary' tableau of little girls growing up in Britain from the 1960s onwards, and a number of films from Taiwan dealing with the end of childhood, Donald considers the ways in which children attempt to escape adult attention. Can children be private? What kinds of privacy are children permitted?

We are very pleased to include in this issue poems by Douglas Oliver, Bernard O'Donoghue, and John Wilkinson. Amongst other things, these poems speak to the derelictions of childhood and the ways in which children struggle, and fail, to speak for themselves.