

POETRY AND THE CHILD

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Poetry and the child by J. Dover Wilson

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J. DOVER WILSON

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by

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I

UPON this planet there dwell two strange races of people. The first is a tribe small of stature and delicate of limb, the members of which make their way into civilized society one by one, arriving among us entirely unable to look after themselves and quite ignorant of our language. Were it not that we take pity on their helplessness, they would perish miserably—thousands, indeed, do so every year—but the majority are welcomed to our houses, fed and clothed by us, and, after a little while, they learn our speech and something of our habits. Yet for the brief space of their existence—a matter of about a dozen years—they remain as strangers among us. They tolerate our patronage and submit to our correction; they even court our admiration and our love. But they take little interest in the things we prize most; their ideals are not our ideals, and they seem to have acquired, in the country from which they came, a standard of values which can with difficulty be adjusted to the facts of this rough-and-tumble world.

Moreover they see a universe quite different from that which is familiar to us. Our eyes are lamps in which the oil of reason more or less brightly burns to illuminate the hard and commonplace road of life; their eyes are charmed magic casements through which the moon of imagination pours, bathing the whole landscape in the light which never was on sea or land. One who was for a time a member of this little folk has described their universe in a memorable passage :

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold; the gates were the end of the world. The green trees, when I saw them first through one of the gates, transported and ravished me; their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem. Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls, tumbling in the street and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; but all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the light of the day, and something infinite behind everything appeared: which talked with

my expectation and moved my desire. The city seemed to stand in Eden or to be built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine, as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the World was mine, and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it. I knew no churlish property, nor bounds, nor divisions: but all property and divisions were mine; all treasures and the possessors of them. So that with much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world.²

In these golden words Thomas Traherne, the English rival of that other Thomas who wrote the *Imitatio Christi*, records an experience which we have all felt. Before we learnt the dirty devices of this world, we ourselves were inmates of this shining universe; for even the blindest and dullest of us was once a child.

But how many of us have forgotten! The adult is an emigrant. The storm-tossed Atlantic of adolescence once passed and the hustling America of maturity reached, with its absorbing commercial activities, its civic responsibilities and its trivial pastimes, the memories of the homeland soon grow dim and at length fade into the light of common day. Moreover

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And even with something of a mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her foster-child, her inmate, Man
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

Yet there are a few—a very few—who have not forgotten. They are not emigrants but exiles, dreaming of Sion by the waters of Babylon. Some, like Vaughan, will sigh for the irreclaimable past:

Happy those early days when I
Shin'd in my angel-infancy!
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy ought
But a white celestial thought;
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back—at that short space—
Could see a glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,

² *Centuries of Meditation*, ed. B. Dobell, 1908, pp. 157-8.

And in those weaker glories spy
 Some shadows of eternity;
 Before I taught my tongue to wound
 My conscience with a sinful sound,
 Or had the black art to dispense
 A several sin to every sense,
 But felt through all this fleshly dress
 Bright shoots of everlastingness.

O how I long to travel back,
 And tread again that ancient track!
 That I might once more reach that plain,
 Where first I left my glorious train;
 From whence the enlighten'd spirit sees
 That shady city of palm-trees.
 But ah! my soul with too much stay
 Is drunk, and staggers in the way!

Some men a forward motion love,
 But I by backward steps would move;
 And when this dust falls to the urn,
 In that state I came, return.¹

To another the vision splendid will seem so real, will shine so bright, that his eyes seem blinded to the land of exile and he will appear scarcely conscious of his banishment.

These form the second race of strange beings of whom I would speak. They are the super-children, the boys who never grow up, the Johnnies-head-in-air, at whose stumbles the world laughs because it cannot see the stars upon which their gaze is fixed. In the face of life's practical or moral problems often as helpless, as wrong-headed, and as pitiable as children, they too live among us as strangers and care little for our ideals, to which indeed they are sometimes actively hostile. That increase in intellectual power which adolescence brings to all has, in their case, been accompanied by an immense growth of the imaginative faculty, so that their world, though still the world of childhood, is a world of even greater wonder and delight. Their main occupation also is play. One who belongs to their race, as Francis Thompson has expressed it, possesses

the child's faculty of make-believe raised to the n^{th} power. He is still at play, save only that his play is such as manhood stops to watch, and his playthings are those which the gods give their children. The universe is his box of toys. He dabbles his fingers in the day-fall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amidst the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hand. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder, and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances

¹ *The Retreat.*

in and out of the gates of heaven; its floor is littered with his broken fancies. He runs wild over the fields of ether. He chases the rolling world. He gets in between the feet of the horses of the sun. He stands in the lap of patient Nature, and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred wilful fashions, to see how she will look nicest in his song.¹

Outdistancing the child in his imaginative sweep, he excels his little kinsman also in his powers of speech; for whereas speech is to children a gift hardly come by and never perfectly acquired, these children of a larger growth are the kings of language. Yet this difference is one of degree, not of kind. Both to child and super-child words are always new, minted afresh every time in the furnace of the mind and stamped with images which never quite correspond with the old designs on the thin and clipped coinage which jingles in our pockets. And this brings us to the chief characteristic of the super-child race, namely its passion for creation. Not that its members ever do anything useful; they are neither mechanics nor manufacturers. But their delight is to employ themselves in building castles out of 'airy nothing', which they people with giants and dragons, knights and damsels; or in making lay-figures with that strange sixth finger, which we call a pen, and a hornful of black mud, which we call ink, and then breathing into them the breath of such glorious and exuberant life that they become living souls far more real than those we meet with in the flesh. Thus, though they add nothing to what Adam Smith called 'the wealth of nations', though they take no part in that all-absorbing task of our civilization—the acquisition, transformation, and distribution of matter—as all useful people are supposed to do, they are the true creators; they are the spirits brooding upon the face of the waters; they bring cosmos or beauty into a world which is without form and void; they say, 'Let there be light', and there is light. And so they have received the name of Makers or Poets.

II

I would suggest that the relationship between child and poet is far more intimate than has been generally realized, and might, if carefully explored, prove very illuminating, both to those who teach children and to those who read poetry. There have, of course, been many great poets who possessed anything but childlike personalities. Pope, for all his lisp in numbers, was middle-aged at birth; Milton is the grand old man of our literature, who sweated his

¹ *Essay on Shelley*, Works of Francis Thompson, vol. iii, p. 18.

daughters; Tennyson we think of as a rather conceited country gentleman; and Matthew Arnold was that *panjandrum panjandrorum*—an inspector of schools! When, however, we speak abstractly of ‘the poet’ or of ‘the poetic temperament’, it is not of such men as these we are thinking, but rather of the great romantics—Shakespeare, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Francis Thompson, &c.—all of whom are distinguished by just those habits and qualities which children possess in a smaller degree.

For his whole life the ‘gentle Shakespeare’ was dressing up and playing the inexhaustible game of pretence; not merely beneath the pent-house of the Globe, but also in that infinite theatre of space of which he counted himself king, and which he filled with the creatures of his teeming imagination. And what dolls he had to play with! Half gollywog and more than half humpty-dumpty, the fat knight of East-Cheap will bring tears of laughter to the eyes of the children of men till the end of the chapter; no levers could lift him up again, being down, and when the tragi-comic crash came the king would not raise a finger, still less send horses and men, to repair the round man’s fallen fortunes. Then there was Prince Hamlet in black velvet and the fair Ophelia in white for the game of funerals; whole armies of toy-soldiers, dressed in every kind of uniform, with Hotspur as generalissimo of the forces; and in Caliban even a kind of Red Indian. Can we not also hear the tired child’s voice, his sand castles overthrown, and his playthings all put away at the bidding of the nurse calling him to bed, in the words of the immortal epilogue—surely the most haunting passage in all literature?—

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

There are not many children in Shakespeare’s plays, but from his day onwards English literature is increasingly concerned with child-life. It is, indeed, not too much to say that the child—in his true nature—was the discovery of English poetry. Centuries earlier a Galilean Peasant had said much upon the subject, and had set a little child before His followers as their pattern; but though the