

1

Questioning Childhood

I cannot reach it; and my striving eye
Dazzles at it, as at eternity.
—Henry Vaughan, from “Childe-hood”¹

Whose Child?

It is now about one hundred years since the child became an official object of Western science. Child study was institutionalized in the universities, the media, and the government extension offices at the moment that the Darwinian explanatory paradigm was sweeping Western self-understanding, and the notion of Progress had not yet been fatally complicated by the Great War. Its birth coincides with the birth of the disciplines that have regulated its discursive space ever since—psychology, sociology, and pedagogy.

Child study is traditionally thought of as the domain of these three forms of discourse. The questions these discourses ask of the child are determined by their historical self-understanding as aspirants to “hard science,” i.e., a science that can make the same universally verifiable knowledge claims as physics or biology say they can about the world and how it works. In order to bend the object of understanding to the method of understanding, the human sciences fall into the unavoidable trap of objectifying children in the same way that hard science must objectify its objects in order to know them. The object of the discipline is born with the discipline—in this case, the child as a natural kind, and the study of the child as an extension of the science of biology. The

questions that get asked of children and of childhood are the same questions that get asked of any organism in its environment. And further, these questions get asked as if by one species—the adult—of another—the child.

This inquiry is not so much directly about the negative consequences of this view of the child and of childhood, of which there are several,² as about the questions of and to children and childhood that it leaves out. Those of us in search of a thicker, more dynamic view of the phenomenon of human childhood are regularly disappointed by the absence of any questions that cannot be answered in terms of the narrowed framework of the search for statistical norms, arrived at through standardized forms of research, leaving us with a child who has been—at the very moment we thought we had accessed the “thing itself”—neutralized by the techniques used to study him or her.

The problem is not just epistemological—not just about what adults can know about children and how—but political. Modern science is as hegemonic a knowledge framework as was the theocentric. Like the theocentric, it presumes to be an epistemological bottom line; in the end, all other knowledge claims must meet its criteria for legitimacy. When a big knowledge framework assumes that kind of self-importance, its fundamental beliefs become elements of perception itself, and are put beyond question. So enframed, we no longer feel the need for identification of and ongoing inquiry into the founding philosophical assumptions that undergird our knowledge claims—we no longer understand ourselves as interpreters, but as direct knowers.

In the case of child study, the interpretations that provide research frameworks for the “child” of normal science are, on the surface anyway, the result of the philosophical constructions of childhood of one or another massively seminal thinker—a Darwin, a Freud, or a Piaget. These thinkers—who are sometimes but not always more aware of their philosophical assumptions than their followers—provide normal science with the big picture for its local research agendas, which take decades to play out, hedged about as they are with self-contained, internally developed methodologies. Typically enough, all three of the giants mentioned above considered themselves scientists rather than philosophers, but the further we are from them in time, the more we see them to have been speaking in the context of ontological, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions that they never felt obliged to fully articulate or clarify. To put it bluntly, the “child” of the modern scientists is a culturally and historically mediated, philosophical construct disguised as the hard object of experimental science.

If one of the aims of this critique is to contribute to the deconstruction of the philosophical assumptions underlying any positivist “science” of childhood, it is only in the service of a richer, both more diverse and more complete view. Only by decentering from the standard normative account can we allow other perspectives to interplay, and find the discursive location from which to ask how and why children have meant, mean, and might mean for the world of adults. The questions that drive such an inquiry can only be described as philosophical, because no matter how many insights or even concrete solutions these questions may lead to, they are themselves ultimately unanswerable. There are questions to ask about and of children that are logically prior to any particular positive model we might hold to as to the nature and experience of childhood, the child’s similarities and differences from adults, the structural dynamics of the developmental process, and even the mechanics of learning.

One such founding question is epistemological: what *can* adults know about children, and how? It is, after all, always as adults that we regard children and childhood. What we call “child” is first of all a child-for-an-adult, and as such, a construct. When we describe the child, we are in one very important sense not directly describing his or her nature, but one characteristic of the relation between the adult and the child. There is no such thing as a “child” apart from an “adult” to observe it. Children only begin to reflect on themselves as children when they are aware there is something called “adulthood,” which they are not part of, and to that extent they have already reached beyond childhood. Childhood and adulthood are two terms of one bipolar concept. If all humans were either children or adults, both terms would lose their meaning.

This observation becomes more obvious once we step out of our own cultural or historical context. Then we find that the boundary between the two terms of this bipolar concept has been drawn differently in different historical epochs, and it is drawn variously along cultural and subcultural lines, and within each individual. All the human sciences—whether psychology, anthropology, sociology, or history—are, in this age of global intervisibility, increasingly aware that, as Kenneth Keniston so neatly put it, “the relationship between historical context and psychological development is far more intimate than we have heretofore suspected.”³ One culture may seem “childlike” to adult Western eyes. On the other hand, Western “adults” may seem curiously obsessive, overly serious, unidimensional beings to some non-Western adults, as well as to certain Western countercultures. In fact the boring,

unimaginative “grown-up” has been a major motif in Western children’s literature since the nineteenth century.

In classical Athens and in some aboriginal cultures, children were regarded as messengers of the gods—beings, as Pierre Erny says, “still full of emanations from the beyond.”⁴ The theme of the child as an opening to the divine is also invoked in the Romantic formulation of the “infant sensibility, great birthright of our being,” a line from perhaps the most popular poem of the nineteenth century—Wordsworth’s “Ode—Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” Emerson also stated the theme in his proclamation of infancy as the “perpetual Messiah which comes into the arms of fallen men and pleads with them to return to paradise.”⁵ For Plato, children exemplified untamed appetite, the soul out of balance. Aristotle concurred. For him, children were incapable of happiness in his sense of the term, because they lacked judgment, or reason.⁶ The modern state invokes children as “future citizens,” which is often used as a code phrase for resources—much like oil reserves, or stands of future timber harvest—for the modern nation-state/economy, which shapes them to its purposes through universal, compulsory schooling. The cost of the state’s educational system to its adult citizens is most typically justified on the assumption that, once fed through the mill of cultural and social reproduction, they will eventually become economically and politically “productive.”

Each of these various ways of knowing children depends on a construction that emerges from a particular balance of the adult-child polarity. Each, in defining “child,” defines “adult.” Some historians of childhood suspect that medieval adults had no concept of “child,” at least after the age of seven or so, because they themselves shared so many characteristics that today we would call “childlike” or “childish.”⁷ The Romantic view of the child as an original openness to being is based at least partly on adult memories of childhood; very often the memories are either selective, or shaped by a religious or cultural-historical discourse. The genre of adult autobiography called the “Childhood” arose in the West at the moment in which the massive social and cultural dislocations of the Industrial Revolution removed large segments of the population from the possibility of a “homeland,” thus driving the latter to a homeland within, to a psychological rather than a geographical location.⁸

The notion of developmental stages itself is not just a biological, but a social construct as well—or a social construct that uses biology as its ruling metaphor. Freud’s “latency” stage, for example, has been described as an invention of late-nineteenth-century educators and child

psychologists under the influence of social, economic, and political pressures, which made it expedient to remove children from the workforce, and to suppress their sexuality.⁹ A stage theory of childhood fits very nicely with the practice of modern schooling, which had its origins in a larger project of “discipline” of the marginalized—the poor, the insane, the native—in the interests of social control.¹⁰ Conversely, during the early Industrial Revolution, as Max Wartofsky pointed out, “the sliding scale of what constitutes ‘childhood’ was adjusted to the political and economic realities of a rapacious factory system.”¹¹

Which Adult?

The concept *adult* is equally liable to historical and cultural deconstruction. As the historian John Boswell demonstrated, there were few “adults” in our sense of the term until relatively recently:

During most of Western history only a minority of grown-ups ever achieved . . . independence: the rest of the population remained throughout their lives in a juridical status more comparable to “childhood,” in the sense that they remained under someone else’s control—a father, a lord, a husband, etc. . . . Words for “children” designate servile adults well into the High Middle Ages, and it is often impossible to be sure, without adequate context, whether the appellation is based on age, or status, or both.¹²

Boswell finds widely varying criteria for determining when adulthood began in ancient and medieval cultures—from biological considerations to legal responsibility, to attributions of a moral sense, to release from paternal authority, to a concept of psychological maturity. Most often, and befitting the shifting bipolarity of the concept “adult-child,” adulthood represents an end to certain incapacities of children—as in Aristotle, their inability to acquire knowledge and to exercise sound judgment—that is, the overcoming of a deficit condition, whether cognitive, psychological, physical, moral, or legal. Norbert Elias confirms this judgment in his narration of the rise of the modern adult subject in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance as an incremental process of instinctual and affective *separation* from the impulses and feelings of childhood, in the interests of a “private self,” for whom a main concern is the development of clear, closely watched boundaries in relation to other private selves.¹³

It could be that the twenty-first century West is experiencing yet another historical shift in the adult-child balance. There are those who suggest that, as the child as we have known him or her “disappears,” the classical modern adult—the one for whom “growing up” or “coming of age” meant leaving his naive, childlike medieval counterpart behind in order to brave the lonely Copernican universe—disappears as well. The most suggestive accounts single out as the prime variable in this shift a new postliterate electronic information environment, which tends to give rise to not only a child privy through the media to the mysteries and brutalities of sex and death, but what has been referred to as the “adult-child”—an adult whose emotional and discursive capacities approximate those of a thirteen year old.¹⁴

The ideal adult of the ancients is the “contemplative” man (sic) formulated by Aristotle and developed by the Stoics and Epicureans. The ideal adult of the early modern period and beyond is the “active” man, the one who acts from a firmly based individual perspective.¹⁵ The late modern adult has acquired an “inner child,” thus signaling a new concern with a revision of the boundaries of the contrastive pair.¹⁶ And it is only since the 1960s that Western adulthood has been increasingly conceived as a period of potential psychological, vocational, and conjugal disruption and change, rendering grownups as liable as children to the risks, opportunities, and vicissitudes of “growth and development”—that is, more like children.

We also find historical and cultural variability, not just in the adult construal of children, but in the ways adults and children interact in real time and space—in the adult-child relation. Adults deal with two kinds of children—both the flesh-and-blood child, which the adult is called on to protect, nurture, and lead forth into adulthood; and the child the adult once was, whether interpreted as the child of memory or the child within. These two children are mutually determinative, in that the way adults relate to their own “child” strongly influences how they see children, and correlatively, their child-rearing attitudes, theories, and practices. But child-rearing attitudes and practices seem to be in a process of evolution: they change as medicine, religion, politics, technology, economics, and demographics change; whereas the adult’s relation with the “child within” seems to persist in certain archetypal characteristics.

Perhaps as an outcome of the ambiguous relation between the historical child and the “child within,” or mythic child, the concept “child” has a way of both attracting and continuously escaping adult projections, and this projective ambivalence makes for a wide variety of adult attitudes toward children, some of them perennial and some of

them changing according to cultural fashion. In our time at least, some adults fawn over children; some treat them as if they were hardly there; some become strangely nervous and distant in their presence; some engage them with a naturalistic gusto they would never demonstrate with other adults; some feel obliged to quiz them on their status—how old are you? Where do you go to school? What grade are you in?—as if childhood were some prolonged military training episode. A historical gallery of child-rearing philosophies and practices would run the gamut from Locke's recommendations for cold baths in the morning, to the renowned distancing of the nineteenth-century British upper classes toward their offspring, to the radically child-centered parents of the contemporary USA, who attribute levels of cognitive and psychological maturity to their children that they can only maintain through a concentrated focus on their own "child within."

All of these examples point again to the extent to which the adult's construction of the child is at the same time his or her self-construction as an adult—whether through mechanisms of distancing children or attempting to relive, re-evolve, or exorcise his or her own childhood through them. This projective, involuntarily transgressive relation to the other may be true of interpersonal life in general, but it has particular poignancy and significance in the case of the adult-child relation, because the child is not just any other for the adult, but an exemplary one.

It is, for one thing, an asymmetrical situation: the child does not influence the adult with her projections as much as the adult does the child with hers—she is less powerful. And because of the child's *difference*—in height, weight, organ size and function, hormonal configuration, and neurological state, as well as, although in a weaker sense than the latter, cognitive, linguistic, affective, and motoric distinctives—she lends herself to being used as a screen for adult projections in the same way that, for white patriarchal civilization, women, "natives," the insane, animals, and the gods do. Her distance from adults makes of her a liminal figure, the representation of a limit condition of the human. Like those other liminal figures, she is easily subspeciated—whether divinized, bestialized, or demonized. She comes to represent a lost totality, a sense of *presence*—of the marriage of the for-itself and the in-itself that haunts adult consciousness, in which presence and absence are in inseparable interplay. She stands for what Derrida characterizes as a life "without differance," which adults both dread and long for: "Man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death, and desired as access to a

life without difference.”¹⁷ But like those other liminal figures, she also represents an opening for psychological development. She is the other who finally cannot be gotten around: her radical alterity demands either violence or dialogue in response. We do not have to look far for the former; the latter, I will argue, offers an enormous promise for the possibilities of personal, social and cultural evolution.

The Western Construction of Childhood

In the realm of alterity and interhuman projection, the child typically serves adults as a sort of cipher, proof-text, or icon for their fundamental assumptions about human nature—or absence thereof—and for the politics of the human condition. Is the child a “person” from the beginning? If not, at what point, and through what processes, does he become so? What does children’s pregenital, polymorphous sexuality tell us about our own? Are girls really born girls, and boys boys? Are children inherently good, or is there a root of evil, or at least of profound egocentrism, which shows itself undissimulated in children? Does humanity—starting with children—require violence, whether “the rod” or the electric chair, in order not to slip into personal and social chaos? Is psychological development a relatively organic, individually driven self-correcting process, or a form of social reproduction? Children draw visceral, involuntary projective answers from adults to these fundamental and unanswerable questions—they evoke them like lightning rods. Interestingly enough, the question, are children different across cultures? rarely evokes such responses. Adults tend to believe implicitly in the universality of childhood.

If we look at the history of those answers, we find a fault line of ambivalence running through the way childhood has been signified in Western classical and Judeo-Christian traditions. On the one hand, children get excluded from full personhood at the very start of the Western rationalist tradition. As has already been mentioned, for Plato and Aristotle children, although they have free will, lack the ability to choose, and are strongly associated with the “appetitive” nature. For Aristotle,

. . . what desires the base and what grows wild needs to be “checked” or “pruned,” and that is, above all, appetite and a child. For, like self-indulgent men, children live as their appetite directs them, and the desire for pleasure is especially strong in them. . . . For it is true that children and beasts are endowed with natural qualities or characteristics, but it is evi-

dent that without intelligence these are harmful. [The free male, the slave, the female, and the child] all have the requisite parts of the soul, but they have them in completely different ways: the deliberative element is completely lacking in the slave; the female has it but without authority; and the child has it but in incomplete form.¹⁸

Plato also often associates children with slaves, women, and animals, and both he and Aristotle group children with the “the sick, the drunk, the insane, and the wicked.”¹⁹

But even here—in the invocation of the human limit condition of animals, the mad, the intoxicated—the positive side of the ambivalence glimmers, for a perennial tradition identifies the drunk and the insane with the “wisdom of the gods.” “Drunkards and children tell the truth,” quotes the (drunken) Alcibiades proverbially in the *Symposium* (then slyly blurts out—“drunkards anyway”).²⁰ Children were indeed associated in Greek mythic lore with nature and the gods, and played parts in festivals and ceremonies to which this association gave them a natural right. Like the gods themselves, children were marginal to the adult world of the *polis*, and so could act as intercessors with beings from other worlds. In Athens, a child was chosen each year to act as intermediary between the initiates and the divine presence in the Mysteries of Eleusis.²¹ The otherness of nature and the otherness of the divine meet in the child archetype in art, myth, and ceremony—not just in the ancient world, but in the medieval, modern, and postmodern, under various tropes.

The ambivalent and even polarized iconic location of “child” both evokes and locates the fault line running through the history of Western subjectivity—between body and mind, flesh and spirit, instinctual expression and repression, license and control, unconscious and conscious, profane and sacred. To the extent that children act as screens for adults’ projections of the first term of each of these contrastive pairs—body, flesh, instinct, license, the unconscious, the profane—they represent the dangerous otherness of the left hand, or “sinister” in the Western discourses of self—the shadow, the unconscious, desire—with which our rationalist tradition heroically struggles, wielding the weapons of what Michel Foucault called “technologies of the self.” As representations of desire, their status—like the status of women, the terminally nonrational (the mad), and the “primitive”—in Western patriarchal culture is both marginal and prophetic. Traditionally, these groups evoke both destructive chaos and the transformative potential of desire. The child’s location in this paradox of subjectivity will play

an important part later in this book, in a discussion of the role of the adult-child relation in the evolution of Western cultural values, and children's status as "privileged strangers" in the politics both of culture and of subjectivity.

The perennial ambivalence toward children travels forward in Western cultural history with greater point and focus in the Judeo-Christian formulation of childhood than in the ancient Greek. The Old Testament tradition is more or less the same as the latter; for both, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child."²² The Old Testament notion of child as "fool" in the negative sense—undisciplined, lacking in judgment, in need of strict and careful shaping—is carried into Christianity in Paul's Epistles, where we are admonished to "no longer to be children, tossed about by every wind of doctrine," and to "grow up to the mature man." But the Gospels take up the other side, thus building ambivalence toward children into the most universal founding text of the West. Jesus presented the child's epistemological difference as a spiritual advantage, and offered her as a model of receptivity to the Word. First, he alludes indirectly to the one evidence of the "left-hand" tradition in the Old Testament (Psalms) when he says, "I praise you father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to infants."²³ Then, as if to make it clear that he is making more than a rhetorical gesture, ". . . he called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven . . . See that you do not look down on one of these little ones . . .'"²⁴ Finally, when he enters the Temple, it is children who publicly identify him as the Messiah. In answering the shocked and angry adults, he then refers directly to the prophetic motif of child as knower that is present in their own sacred and immemorial tradition: "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?'"²⁵

Christianity, as Peter Fuller has pointed out, "exalted childhood and held it up as an exemplar for living . . . that a child should be put forward as an example is something quite new in the history of religions, and equally new in the history of cultures."²⁶ Yet the early church fathers seem to have followed Paul's view of the child as deficit and danger, and interpreted Jesus' injunction to become "as little children" in a strictly metaphorical way. The child as negative exemplar was perfected by the next greatest influence in early Christianity, Augustine, for whom—as he lamented his own jealousy, selfishness and deviancy even as an infant—she became the proof-text of original sin.

Jesus' evocation of the ancient tradition of child as unconscious master—already articulated by Lao Tzu five hundred years earlier, and present in world mythology—has had a much more gradual, more secret influence. In the real world of cultural politics, recognition of the personhood of children grew with Christianity—the Church was the first to take a consistent, articulated stand against infanticide—but it was not until the High Middle Ages, in Saint Francis, Bernard of Clairvoix, Anselm, and the increasing influence of the cult of Mary, that the radical dimension of these Jesus sayings started bearing cultural fruit. It is in the medieval mystical tradition that the child starts being mentioned as a model for positive understanding in the sphere of spiritual life and discipline, rather than just ignorance of evil.²⁷

The Jesus sayings on childhood, while they can be placed in a more ancient wisdom-of-the-child tradition, also set another theme for Western self-understanding in terms of the child as exemplar of instinct, the unconscious, and desire. Christ embodies a number of mythic archetypes and motifs of the divine that had already been stated in the ancient world: the dying and rising god of ancient agricultural religions (Attis, Adonis), the god of miracle and intoxication, or the “new wine” (Dionysius), the childhood of the god (Hermes, Dionysius), the myth of the hero's descent to the underworld (Orpheus, Jonah). It is in his role as divine Fool, however—the ragged, holy wanderer with “no place to lay his head,” whose involuntary, necessarily cryptic wisdom is misunderstood by the adults around him—that he identifies most closely with children. Both the Fool and the Divine Child effect a reversal of an established patriarchal wisdom tradition. Both assert the claims of a form of knowledge that comes from the margins, and therefore is paradoxical, enigmatic, even garbled, and spoken in a “prelapsarian tongue.” This prelapsarian language is not conscious, but a secret language of the world that is expressed unconsciously in play. In *King Lear*, for example, only the Fool can speak the whole truth of the situation, but in riddles and nonsense, or he will lose his head. Augustine's conversion is triggered by the voice of a child chanting playfully on the other side of a garden wall. The Fool and the child differ in that one is post-adult and one pre-adult, but both point to the same thing—a transgressive wisdom, the wisdom of the liminal and the marginalized, of reversal and play and subversion of conventional norms and understanding.²⁸ This theme does not lack practical significance for the evolution of the adult-child relation in the West.

In addition to the fundamental ambivalence that runs through Western adults' construction of children and childhood, the child has also served as a screen for specific historical projections based on that

ambivalence, none of which seem to have very much to do with the actual conditions of childhood, or adults' treatment of children. The high medieval period had its holy child; the Calvinist Reformation used the child to prove original sin, or "total depravity." For the Romantics, the child represented genius and the unity of being and knowing, or nature unconstrained. For Darwin and his followers, the child shows us the childhood of the race; for behaviorism, the child is proof-text for the *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, or drives-waiting-to-be-shaped. For Freud, childhood is present through the whole life cycle, for it is the moment of formation of a permanent style of relation between primary narcissism and the reality principle, and thus the point of origin of adult health or neurosis. For Piaget, the child demonstrates a structuralist account of the ontogenesis of rationality.²⁹ In all cases the child's difference makes of her a text that is just distant enough in time and experience for theory to not just appropriate, but to colonize.

Piaget, whose cognitive child was as influential in the second half of the twentieth century as Freud's affective child was in the first, also marks a clear set of preunderstandings about the fundamental issues for which children are proof-texts. Piaget's child is modeled on lower organisms engrossed in adaptive, evolutionary processes. Implicit in his developmental hierarchy is the assumption that, as Stephen Toulmin puts it, "the child's 'native capacities' are specifically pre-adapted to construct one and only one final conception of 'reality' and to reinvent the same concepts of causality, conservation, etc., in all situations—so recapitulating the cultural experience of the species."³⁰ Further, this "final conception of 'reality'" is, as the philosopher Charles Taylor points out, based on two directing ideas—decentration and reversibility—both of them elements of a particularly Western conception of objectivity.³¹ We attain reversibility when we grasp our object as a coherent system of potential transformations, and hence as an ideally manipulable object, whose operations we therefore dominate, intellectually if not in act. For Piaget, cognitive objectivity is a result of normal development, and overcomes childhood's "egocentrism," just as for Freud the mature adult overcomes "the residues of childhood" through a "prolongation of education," that is, progressive rationalization.³² Yet both of these analytic giants, although they maintained a deficit theory of childhood, opened the way for insights that have contradicted it, thus maintaining the tradition of ambivalence.

As a characteristic of an adult white male form of interpretation, the modern "science of childhood" tends consistently to represent the young child's own perceptions of and judgments about the world as *not* the adult's, and to distort them in the image of the bipolar adult projections

sketched above—projections which remain, if not unconscious, at least suppressed. That the “child” of child psychology is as much a portrait of the adult observer as of the observed is a perfectly normal situation, were it recognized as such and explored bilaterally rather than unilaterally. The classical positivistic scientific model denies or ignores it. But the anterior unity of knower and known that the adult-child relation illustrates so well is actually paradigmatic for the human sciences, if not, as modern physics is making increasingly clear, for science in general.

Theorizing Childhood

As a form of interpretation of the other, modern scientific theory is structurally impositional and non-dialogical, since it associates truth with objectification. When it is applied to groups of exemplary others—children, women, “natives,” etc.—such theory can become violent. Because it is philosophically unreflective, it is difficult to locate the divide between theory and the educational practices it legitimates, which are so constructed as to reinforce, in turn, the theory. Both theory and practice work in the service of an overarching ideology whose fundamental assumptions are more or less masked or unconscious. This is glaringly obvious in various historical racial and gender theories. The latter provide a legitimating discourse for the ideology of colonialism, which, as the postcolonial scholar Ashis Nandy has pointed out, is a close relative to what he calls the “ideology of adulthood.”³³ The ideology of adulthood underlies mainstream theory and practice in education, child rearing, and children’s law. Nandy’s point is that the ideology of colonialism, like the ideology of adulthood, construes the “native” as “child”—immature, dependent, and incomplete. Children—if they are male and non-native—hold the promise of journeying out of this deficit condition into fully socialized adult human normality. Natives hold the promise of developing into Westerners.

The ideology of adulthood is reflected in the practices of state-mandated and provided universal schooling. Here theory works in the service of objectification and disempowerment of both children and their teachers in several ways. Theories of child development, which are characterized by a stage model, make it easy for a capitalist—a competitive, extrinsic-motivation—model of education to go unchallenged; if we already know where children are going and how, then we have arrived there before them, and can plan their journey for them. Theory also provides convenient labels—ADD, ADHD, ED, SLD, ODD, etc.—for childhood disorders that are exacerbated if not brought on by disempowering

practices of traditional schooling itself. There is no dimension in impositional theory that allows for dialogue with children, so when it gets translated into educational practice, the result is not transformation through the dialectics of the theory-practice relation, but rigidification and stagnation of that relation, and intensification of habitual practices.

Like any ideology, the ideology of adulthood, which depends on and interacts with a theory of childhood, has its origins in larger issues than just those of education or child rearing. An ideology of adulthood implies a set of cultural norms that determine beliefs—and therefore institutions and behaviors—about the relationship between good and evil, autonomy and heteronomy, justice and injustice, individual and community, instinct and repression, freedom and control, the biological and the cultural, nature and supernature, a view of persons and of the nature of cosmos. If this is the case, then change in how adults see the deeper issues that inform ideology should lead to change in how they view themselves as adults, and therefore how they view children. This, in turn, should lead to change in the sort of theory that is applied to children, and to the forms of life of adults and children together, including the one we call “school.” The question is whether this is a necessary causal chain. Could it work backward, or in some other combination of causes and effects? Could, for instance, a change in schooling follow from a dialogical rather than an impositional theory, leading to more widespread change in the adult-child relation, and thereby to ideological change? This direction places the burden on theory. My assumption is that the five variables just mentioned—how adults see the deeper issues, how they understand themselves, how they view children, which theory they apply to children, and adult-child forms of life—are in a relationship of mutual causality; any one or more can trigger any other or others. When theory becomes dialogical, prevailing ideology is challenged by new information, which leads to social and cultural transformation. When children are no longer reified, colonized subjects—when their voices are heard—the ideology of adulthood will change. As ideology changes, the theory of childhood and therefore the form of life of children will change, which will lead to changes in the form of life of adults. The issue is how to find a theory—that is, a form of interpretation—which allows children voice, which is where dialogue begins.

Adult-Child Dialogue

Adult-child dialogue is distinguished from adult-adult dialogue by a few complicating factors. All adults were children once, and this makes it

easy for them to assume a kind of first-hand knowledge about childhood and children—an attitude that tends to preclude dialogue, for the latter involves the bracketing of commonsense knowledge in the recognition of difference. Adults live with their own childhoods in an ambiguous state of memory and forgetting. Most experience what Freud called “childhood amnesia,” the near total loss of memory of the events and the mental and emotional states of one’s early years. The adult finds himself with few categories into which his early childhood experience, which seems to precede the development of conventional memory, can fit in order to be retained. Yet not only does he know he was a child once, but often still feels like a child—treated like a child, for example—or in a child’s position of what Dieter Misgeld calls “having to start over”—even if he can’t quite connect it with his own experience *as* a child. Misgeld says, “. . . being an adult, if treated as a matter to be achieved again and again, makes us take note that we, as adults, must sometimes think of ourselves as being *like* children in order for us to say that we are adults.”³⁴ This creates a situation of both familiarity and strangeness that makes it easy for adults to use children as screens onto which they project their own unacknowledged psychological complexes. It sets the stage either for projective reactions to children, or for dialogue.

The child also lives ambiguously in the world of adults. She is born into and grows up in a world physically scaled to adults,³⁵ and scheduled, planned, ordered, and controlled by them. Until her capacities for categorization and inference are fully developed, she can only take it on faith that she will some day grow out of her childhood and into a world that fits her sense of growing autonomy and her hunger for mastery. As the adult is but is not a child, so she is but is not an adult. She herself is often impatient of, and sometimes in contempt of, her own childhood. Maurice Merleau-Ponty evokes this ambiguity: “It is true, both that adult functions are already represented in children, and that they don’t mean in the same way as they do in adults.”³⁶ Although she shares and participates in the adult’s life world, that participation is not as straightforward as it seems. Often she demonstrates a style of lived experience that differs significantly from adults’. Not only her physical vulnerability, but her emotional and behavioral lability make of her what Merleau-Ponty described as a “polymorph,” neither “an absolute ‘other’,” nor “‘the same’ as us.”³⁷ She is only discovering, or has just discovered death—first that of other living things, and in a slowly dawning way, the logical inevitability of her own. She is only just discovering murder, war, criminality and the police, theft, natural catastrophe, the intentionality of evil, human cruelty (including her own), and her own

vulnerability to physical and emotional pain. She is only just acquiring the adult language games that interpret the limits of cause and effect, the definition of what is alive and what is not, the boundaries between self and other, and the metaphysics of the self-body relation.

Children's sense of time does not seem to be just the same as adults'—there is not the same balance that adults have struck between objectivized time and lived time. Children's strong drives to touch things, their intrinsically playful use of the physical environment, their sometimes startling attention to detail, their often dramatic emotional lability, their diffused, or "polymorphous" form of sexuality—all of these and more start, as we give our attention to them, to show subtle differences, which add up to a form of life that is related yet different from adults. We recognize it, even find it within ourselves, yet also find it alien, sometimes even disturbing. Some of these differences have to do with organic factors like the neuronal environment of the brain, some with experience or lack of it, and some with culture and historical worldview. Culture and historical worldview can either play up the differences in biology and maturation between children and adults or minimize them, depending on where and how they draw the line between "child" and "adult." We gather, for example, that medieval adults shared more of the characteristics of children alluded to above than do modern adults.³⁸ But wherever the line is drawn, there are differences.

Whatever causal factors bring these differences about, and whether they are differences of kind or degree—or some of both—they are effective differences within the human lifeworld. They make for conflict, misunderstanding, delight, astonishment, awe, frustration, anger, attachment, etc. between adults and children, in somewhat the same way two similar cultures might have differences (e.g., Spanish and Italian) or two different cultures might have similarities (e.g., African-American and tribal African), and never really be able to distinguish what's quite the same and different. This ambiguity of difference and similarity between the lifeworlds of children and adults presents us squarely with what Alfred Schutz called the "dialectical difficulty" that arises in their attempts at mutual understanding. The passing from one "province of meaning" to the other can only be performed by what he describes as "a 'leap', . . . a specific shock, which compels us to break through the limits of this [adult] 'finite' province of meaning and to shift the accent of reality to another one."³⁹ This is complicated by the fact that the difference between the two provinces of meaning can vary across culture and historical period. In an epoch or a culture in which a significant distance has not opened up between children and adults—as

we shall see is thought to have been the case in Europe until the early modern period—there was hardly a leap to be made. The factors contributing to the opening of this distance in the West—along with the implications for cultural development that this distance represents—will be taken up further along.

The “dialectical difficulty” that Schutz mentions is in fact the very difficulty that hermeneutics, or interpretation theory—which is a theory of dialogue—works to overcome. Hermeneutics was originally about reading texts, but it emerged from a situation analogous to the adult-child relation: people were seeking to understand texts written during one historical epoch that had become distant and even strange to another. In other words, the hermeneutical situation begins when we (adults) confront a text (child) from which we have become distant, thus creating a relation in which we encounter both familiarity and strangeness, and a certain level of alienation and misunderstanding.⁴⁰ If this were not the case, the whole interpretive process would not even be called for. “The aim of all hermeneutics,” according to Paul Ricoeur, “is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalizes, renders contemporary and similar.”⁴¹ Like the Schutzian leap, interpretation has, as Hans-Georg Gadamer says, “to cross the abyss of historical consciousness.”⁴² As there is an abyss between us and our historical past, so there is a potential abyss between each individual and her childhood.

Forgetfulness is the pervasive context of our experience of finitude, and it is forgetfulness that works to create the distance between adult and child. Hermeneutics operates in a space of difference between, not only reader and text, but subject and object. It is dialogical in that the reader/subject places himself within that space of difference, in what Martin Buber called “actuality,” that is “participation in a being that is neither merely a part of him nor merely outside of him,”⁴³ and takes it as his task to interrogate this “between.” The hermeneutical relationship is particularly apposite to the adult-child relation because it denies in its very structure the possibility of the situation of objectivity that is exemplified by modernist theory. It represents a move beyond the Western objectivity-myth, in that, for interpretation-theory a science free from prejudice is impossible. There is always a set of preunderstandings—a historical-cultural horizon—from which we view the text-other. This is not only a historical-cultural horizon, but an ontological situation, which Ricoeur describes as “belonging.” The “allegedly autonomous subject and the allegedly adverse object,” he insists, are actually two terms of a “prior relation of inclusion” that encompasses

them both.⁴⁴ It is through the subject coming into dialogue with the object rather than isolating it in theoretical constructs that understanding emerges. As such, hermeneutics is theory as affinity and participation, rather than as distance and domination. It resists the idea that through subjecting nature—in this case in the form of the child—to mathematical/statistical construction nature can be known except partially.

It is central to the dialogical relation that the knower is changed by the known in the act of knowing. Through opening oneself to the object and its different meanings, one comes, not only to a new understanding of the object, but to a new self-understanding. There is no overview that would enable us to grasp in a single glance the whole of the object, or even its complete context, but only the horizon of the play of our relation, and the discipline of the dialogue. “To understand,” says Ricoeur, “is not to project oneself into the text [read “child”] but to expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds”:

To appropriate is to make what was alien become one’s own. What is appropriated is indeed the matter of the text. But the matter of the text becomes my own only if I disappropriate myself, in order to let the matter of the text be. So I exchange the me, master of itself, for the self, disciple of the text . . . This radical and final form of distancing is the ruin of the ego’s pretention to constitute itself as ultimate origin.⁴⁵

The movement of distancing and appropriation in encountering texts is directly analogous to what occurs when the adult engages in hermeneutical dialogue with children. The resulting “fusion of horizons”—to use Gadamer’s well-known phrase—involves what he calls a “moment of negativity” before another form of life, or manner of being in the world.⁴⁶ This is equivalent to Ricoeur’s notion of disappropriation of (adult) self in order to let the “matter of the text” of the child’s form of life be. It could also be described as the withdrawal of projection, in order to allow the phenomenon of the child’s form of life to appear. It is to enter the province of meaning of what Aristotle called *thaumazein*, or “wonder,” before the “text” of the young child. In wonder, the stereotypic world of projection is stopped momentarily, and things appear as if for the first time.

The appropriation of the child-text that follows the moment of negativity is also a letting go: “It is in allowing itself to be carried off towards the reference of the text that the ego divests itself of itself.”⁴⁷ For the adult in hermeneutical relationship to childhood, the latter has a

revelatory power. It involves a new self-understanding, which includes at the least an understanding of the child as a positive phenomenon—a real interlocutor, a full-fledged other. The adult self, thus enlarged by the appropriation of the form of life of the child, is a self to which childhood speaks more coherently from its place in the life cycle than before; correlatively, it is a self that has begun the process of re-appropriating its own childhood to some greater degree.

The adult appropriation of childhood is also the appropriation of a new or rediscovered form of knowledge. Through my dialogue with children and childhood, I am provided with a new pattern for reading experience. Gadamer associates this with the Platonic *anamnesis* or “recollection,”⁴⁸ in the sense that “what is known in the event of understanding is made present again, but not as a mere retrieval or a repetition of a past actuality.”⁴⁹ Rather, it is an event into which we are continually being drawn, and which is never completely ascertained in some final understanding. The characteristic of the fusion of horizons between the adult and the child is, as in all dialectical relationships, that ultimately the “tension between the other and oneself is unsurpassable. . . . The first guiding insight is to admit of the endlessness of this task. . . . The very idea of a definitive interpretation seems to be intrinsically contradictory. Interpretation is always on the way.”⁵⁰ The fusion of horizons is never complete.

The hermeneutics of the adult-child relation is a primary, archetypal example of the “belonging” between subject and object, and in fact calls into question the primacy of the individual subject. It acts to demystify the notion of the autonomous, separated adult consciousness, and of adulthood as an end state of development. It is also a hermeneutics of recollection—a restoration, or reappropriation of the meaning of childhood for the whole life cycle, and a “revelation of new modes of being”—new capacities for knowing oneself through exposing ourselves to the “text” of the child.

Even the notion of approaching the young child as a text, perhaps on the surface a most unlikely analogy, has confirmation in the modern understanding of not only myth and literature, but the unconscious itself as structured like language. This is particularly true of early childhood to the extent that its forms of life are relatively unreflective, involuntary, and spontaneous—that is, more direct expressions of unconscious structures. The form of life of early childhood can be understood as an inscription by existence itself, that is, a human text with certain universal characteristics that we find across history and culture. The young child, not yet fully aware that he is present to himself from some location beyond himself that keeps time and marks the

spot, is caught up in his early childhood as in a dream. The years until six or seven are typically ones that, as Herbert Read said in his memoirs, “we seemed not so much to live as to be lived by forces outside of us, by the wind and the trees and moving clouds and all the mobile engines of our expanding world.”⁵¹ We may even loosely characterize early childhood as a universal, original form of life. Gaston Bachelard, in his epic meditation on childhood, referred to it as a “well of being”—“an anonymous childhood, a pure threshold of life, original life, original human life.”⁵²

The universal characteristics of the form of life of early childhood are perhaps expressed most dramatically in children’s art and play, but are present to us more directly as linguistic, perceptual, cognitive, affective, and relational patterns. We sense the vulnerability and lability of this form of life, and both the beauty and the terror connected with it, as if to be a young child were often to be in a sort of fugue state. This poignant immediacy is captured by Rilke in the poem “Childhood,” both in his evocation of “miraculous time,” when “the streets are gleaming and ringing, all the fountains flash up from the squares,” and the “senseless grief. . . dream . . . dread . . . bottomless abyss” of childhood anonymity. The young child, kneeling beside the “great gray pond,” forced by something he doesn’t yet recognize as himself to “have to think about the little pale face that shone up from the water, sinking,” is alternately freed and imprisoned by the personal anonymity and universal humanity of childhood.⁵³

The form of life of early childhood was of great interest to Merleau-Ponty, because it also represented for him an “original life,” a life lived more closely in the subject-world unity founded in perception. He characterized this unity prior to reflection variously as the “tacit cogito,” and *ouverture au monde* or “opening on the world,” as a fundamental “intimacy between vision and the visible” and in his final formulation, “wild being.” If, as he says, “the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh,”⁵⁴ the young child’s perceptual, noetic, and affective modes are the text authored by this universal flesh, and it is this text we are concerned to read through our dialogue with the child’s form of life. The task is to read it, not as a decipherment—as if it were a code for something that, through a formula of transformation, we could translate into adult perception, cognition, affect, or relation—nor reductively, as if it were the accidental human face of a nonhuman process of organismic development. Both of those readings are possible, and perhaps even necessary to approximate a complete account. Rather, we may read it like a narrative or poetic text—the representation of involuntary imaginative child life, which presents to me,

the adult, what Ricoeur refers to as “new possibilities of being-in-the-world opened up within everyday reality.” For me, the adult reader of childhood, the text of the child’s form of knowledge is a redescription of reality, an “imaginative variation . . . on the [adult] real.”⁵⁵

The adult drive for reappropriation and imaginative variation is most often expressed in the play of art and literature, of myth, of religious symbolism and iconography. The hermeneutical movement of recollection is a long-standing theme, in the Western tradition at least, of adult psychological and spiritual development. The child is a central symbol for this theme, which in religion and psychoanalysis is the archetypal story of an original unity, followed by a necessary voyage into disunity or “fall,” followed by the search for the recovery of that unity on a higher level. This story is a key paradigm, not just for adult development, but for the evolution of child rearing and educational practices as well, because through seeing optimal adult development as in some way a reappropriation of childhood, it links the process of adult development with our relations with the real child, the child before us, whether as son or daughter, student or friend.

The Child Before Us: Education, Parenting, and the Evolution of Subjectivity

Objectivism in whatever form is the appropriate and inevitable theoretical mode for education as mere cultural reproduction, because it remains strategically ignorant of its grounding beliefs—an ignorance made possible by an incalculable mixture of “common sense” and scientism. It is theory as force and as violence, whether that violence be personal or structural, and however it may be palliated by the presence of dialogical persons attempting naively to wield it, or simply to survive the instrumental structures it creates and maintains. It is a system that is structured according to the ideology of adulthood. We are all familiar with the force that permeates the structures of our world⁵⁶—but to consider it inevitable in the world of education and child rearing is to foreclose on one of the most crucial possible contexts for transforming the world in the image of something other than force.

A hermeneutics of childhood calls for a form of education based on dialogue, in the notion of which is implicit the development and the “leading forth” (*educare*) of the adult as well as the child. What we have called “school” at least since the advent of universal, compulsory schooling, is in the vast majority of cases a locus of reproduction—a machine through which there is inscribed on the body and in the

discourse of the child the codified violence of a society whose main engine is force. In the language of dialogical education, “school” is, on the contrary, an adult-child collective—a locus for the reshaping of adult habit and self-understanding through dialogue with the impulse life of the child as much as the shaping of the child’s impulse life into habit associated with adulthood.⁵⁷ It is a place of mutual reconstruction through the forms of life of a community whose main preoccupation is the intergenerational reconstruction, through project and inquiry, of philosophy, art, science, and politics. Its overarching social goal is the formation of, not rationality but reason—in the sense that rationality is objectifying, monological, and impositional, while reason is based on reciprocity, intersubjectivity, dialogue, and negotiation.

Such a school implies understanding education as an ongoing social experiment, where child meets adult in the interests of mutual transformation. That exactly the opposite is generally the case—that the traditional school is a place where the law is inscribed on the flesh, where possibility is curbed and curtailed in the interests of efficiency and “fit” to existing norms and patterns—is no reason to commit the genetic fallacy, as the majority of practicing educators do, and assume that because it is that way it ought to be that way, or that it can be no other way. Education is not the only Western institution that toils in the service of larger structures of domination that continually betray its possibilities. We have comparatively few models of education as social experiment in the intentional community of an adult-child collective, and many of them, because they are “excluded others” to the educational establishment, are boundary cases.

The ideology of adulthood—if we follow the psychohistorian Lloyd deMause’s account of the evolution of Western child-rearing modes in the direction of the “empathic”⁵⁸—is already under deconstruction, and perhaps has been since Jean-Jacques Rousseau was moved to write *Emile*, if not before among the British upper middle classes of the late seventeenth century.⁵⁹ The fact that schools have not been in the vanguard of this evolution suggests that they were founded in the early modern period to function as mechanisms of social reproduction and state control⁶⁰—a suspicion amply confirmed in Michel Foucault’s analysis of the rise of “discipline” during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries⁶¹—and will only change under the influence of much larger changes from outside of them. Although it would be naive to seek a model of profound social change that depends on anything but multiple influences in reciprocal interaction, the fissure that has been opened in adult self-understanding in the postmodern West is perhaps the most promising—and the most volatile—of the five variables

involved in major change mentioned above (p. 14) for the deconstruction of the ideology of adulthood and the decolonization of education. For it is how adults understand themselves and the structure, limits and possibilities of their own subjectivity that determines how they understand children and childhood.

Postmodern adult subjectivity is laboring under a number of influences that act to deconstruct the ideology of adulthood. The original template for the Western notion of the adult subject, stated clearly by Plato in his utopian treatise *Republic*, not only excludes childhood altogether—which Plato seems to have implicitly understood as a kind of deformity of self—but is founded upon relations of internal hierarchy and domination. His seminal characterization described the self as composed of three elements or dimensions—appetite, volition or will, and reason—which in order to function optimally, require the domination of the first two elements by the last and smallest. Appetite must come under the rulership of will, and will of reason, or the consequence is personal and social chaos.⁶² Plato's conception is a static, hierarchical one—at least from our position in the history of subjectivity—which defines optimal adulthood (i.e., the successful self) as a nested structure of domination, directly analogous to the traditional Indo-European tripartite class structure of royalty, military, and peasant.⁶³ This model of self traveled into the modern West through Stoic and Christian traditions, and was rendered into a radical dualistic ontology in early modernism in Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Not only is it a coercive notion of self-formation, but from Plato until now it forces children—whom it characterizes as naturally dominated by appetite and self-will—in the position of chaotic, even monstrous beings, in need of specific discipline to bring the dimensions of the self into successful balance.

Perhaps the most influential Western model of subjectivity after Plato's—Freud's—deconstructs this hierarchy, and places the elements of the self not just in a more complex, but in a dialogical and even dialectical, relationship.⁶⁴ There is still an internal politics of self in Freud, but it is a politics in which ambiguity and mutual influence and even interpenetration of contradictory elements predominate. Relationships of hierarchy are reinterpreted as relations of repression, displacement and sublimation—none of which presuppose conscious mastery of one element by another, but rather fluid negotiations—and the possibility is at least acknowledged⁶⁵ of cultural influences that can minimize repression. Most importantly for child rearing and education, Freud's model leads to the redefinition of the human life cycle as multi- rather than unilinear: all the phases of the cycle are represented in each one,

whether—as Erik Erikson has shown us—in prefiguration or reconstruction.⁶⁶ This shift indicates that childhood is now understood as a permanent or perennial aspect of adulthood, a dimension of subjectivity with which the adult is in continual, lifelong dialogue.

It is this dialogue within adult subjectivity that distinguishes the parent or teacher as “hermeneut” from the one for whom childhood still represents a buried or undiscovered aspect of self. In the semiotics of intersubjectivity, the character of my relations with the child before me is linked with the character of my relations with the child I still am, with whom other dimensions of my selfhood are in a continual process of dialectical reconstruction. As a subject-in-process, for whom change and development are the very conditions of subjectivity, and who has no developmental terminus beyond a continuously receding horizon of ultimate integration, the child I still am comes to represent the promise of a self that is a permeable structure, open to dialectical transformation and less liable to the habituated ruts of adult subjectivity. The vertiginous character of this shift from self as closed to open structure in the post-modern West is lost neither on its advocates nor its conservative critics. The politics of subjectivity is the deep undercurrent of the culture wars of our time, and the school has become a strategic field of battle—perhaps even, for now, more strategic than the family, for it is here that children are initiated into the forms of intersubjectivity of the culture as a whole.

Questioning childhood means questioning adulthood, and questioning adulthood means reconsidering the goals, processes, and fundamental values of the life cycle—which means, in turn, reconsidering our mutual relationships, both individual and collective, whether economic, political, or sexual. Childhood represents one point of convergence of these reconsiderations, and signifies the ever-recurring possibility for social and cultural transformation. To repress that possibility is to repress our own possibilities as a species and its capacity for reconstruction. The chapters that follow take up that possibility along multiple lines of inquiry—historical, mythological, artistic, literary, psychoanalytic and, finally, educational. What emerges from their interplay is, simply put, a sketch for cultural evolution based on the evolving adult-child relationship. On a biological level, the phenomenon of neoteny—the prolonged childhood of the human species—could be considered to be the key ingredient in that evolution, for it represents the plasticity of the species. My argument revolves around the assumption that the lived world of childhood is the open space in the human experience for cultural transformation; and that as children are progressively accorded

the status of full-fledged interlocutors with adults, that space will bloom in ways that have been characteristically suppressed until now, and the human experience will, however slowly, change to allow—as the Romantic poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it at the moment of the discovery of childhood in the modern West—each of us to “carry the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood.”⁶⁷