

2

The Victorian Child— Social and Theological Attitudes

CONCEPTS RELATING TO CHILDHOOD in Victorian times were full of paradox and enigma and it is helpful to explore these as benchmarks against which to compare MacDonald's contrasting image (chapter 3) as a precursor to considering how he uses it (chapters 4–8). Since children are representative of the race (that is, children are human, not merely potentially so), the “theology of childhood” is central to Christian anthropology. It is therefore, as Karl Rahner observed, curious that there is no definitive articulation of such a theology.¹ Theological musings on the subject do, nevertheless, abound. They are the focus here and are far from inconsequential.

Sin and Innocence

We begin by considering an example of the implication of certain “theological musings.” Western theology, since Augustine, has been preoccupied with the doctrine of original sin, a doctrine contested by Pelagius (and MacDonald): one side insisting that the child is essentially corrupt, the other that it is innocent.² Taking these emphases to their

1. Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 33.

2. John Milbank notes that Augustine does *not* say that all humans are guilty of original sin. Rather, we are guilty, like the hands of a murderer, for the sin of the race. See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 10.

absurd conclusions with respect to child-rearing, we have, on the one hand, Coleridge's "hands off" approach, leaving Hartley to be mothered by nature. On the other (rejecting the idea that nature, human or otherwise, is in any way benign) we have Jonathan Edwards's daughter, Esther Edwards Burr, writing in the 1750s that she has begun to use the whip on her ten-month-old daughter.³ It is immediately apparent that MacDonald's assertion that God is a child is likely to raise significant questions for the later descendants of Jonathan Edwards.

For most of the nineteenth century, the Puritan view dominated: childhood was considered a necessary evil, a stage in life to be left behind as soon as possible (despite some insisting that childhood extended to the age of thirty).⁴ Though such views had thawed somewhat by mid-century, attitudes to childhood were predominantly negative, especially in a religious community suspicious of childhood passion and vice—evidence of original sin. The ascendancy of evolutionism did little to emancipate childhood: the burden of original sin was simply exchanged for that of collective racial memory as the "little savages" in their cots were deemed to not only recapitulate the dawn of humanity, but carry collective memories of a natural history which, unlike the benign vision of the Romantics, was red in tooth and claw. It led to *fin de siècle* pessimism, such as that of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*; a vision of children burdened with inchoate ancestral memories, predetermined by heredity, and unmoved by free will. *Jude* graphically expresses the logical outcome of evolutionary determinism, particularly—according to Sally Shuttleworth—the depressingly pessimistic version of Schopenhauer. Thus the category of childhood, viewed as a period of innocence and naivety, is waning by the end of the century, if not abolished.⁵ For Hardy, all children are "old," dramatized most clearly in the child nicknamed Father Time who, according to Hardy, was "Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through the crevices."⁶ For Hardy, childhood is illusory. Father Time, a conflation of deity and humanity, is here packed onto a train by his birth mother with a poor box of belongings and sent to stay with an unknown father who has not been told he is coming. He sits, saucer-eyed, in the third-class carriage, "an

3. Esther Edwards Burr quoted in Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 327.

4. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 20.

5. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 353.

6. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 261. See also Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 340.

enslaved and dwarfed Divinity.” Father Time, aged before his time and expelled from his creation, is travelling into the void to an uncertain fate and taking humanity with him.

MacDonald’s suggestion that God is a child—a claim we will unpack in due course—is, therefore, a radical challenge to theology and forces reconsideration of the value of childhood. MacDonald, like Hardy, conflates age and youth but he reverses the analogy, underlining the eternity, as well as the childlikeness, of God: it is adulthood with its pretentious cultural accretions, its selfishness, and its power-lust that is false; the goal of humanity is not to leave childhood behind as soon as possible, but to embrace it and emulate the God that is, using Hardy’s language, “Juvenility masquerading as Age.” The goal of life is divine childlikeness. It is adulthood, not childhood, that is synonymous with sin.

Whether viewed positively or negatively, the child was at the heart of the Victorian world. Sally Shuttleworth summarizes thus:

The figure of the child lies at the heart of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, race, and selfhood: a figure who is by turns animal, savage, or female, but who is located not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the very centre of English domestic life.⁷

Early- and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Attitudes to Childhood

Natural Religion and the Romantic Inheritance

At the outset we note, with Ann Wierda Rowland, that “the history of children and the history of childhood are two different things”; that the child as a social construct has a somewhat tangential, tenuous relationship to the lived experiences of real children.⁸ Lamentations regarding the loss or erosion of childhood have more to do with the former.⁹ This distinction goes some way towards accounting for Judith Plotz’s complaint that Romantic ideas did little to contribute to reform. Her work, nevertheless,

7. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 4.

8. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 7.

9. A recent example might be Rowan Williams’s observation that the space called “childhood” is being eroded by a society bent on exploiting its children. See Williams, *Lost Icons*, 20.

reveals the weakness of developing philosophical ideas at some distance from social context. Wordsworth, for example, stands accused of using his Romantic idealism to justify parental neglect,¹⁰ and that this distortion of reality—the conceptual, poetic separation of the child from both the adult and the real world—is prescient of later Romantic texts that set a lone child against the world (see below). Plotz is not impressed:

This separation of adult from child defines the Wordsworthian child. It is not innocent radiance or joy, but an aesthetically embalmed apartheid that constitutes Wordsworth's major contribution to the nineteenth-century literature of childhood.¹¹

Theoretically at least, however, childhood for the Romantics *was* a state of “innocent radiance or joy” where the infant mind was not only attuned to nature’s ministrations, but “trailing clouds of glory” as if still semi-conscious of its divine origin. Wordsworth’s manifesto on childhood, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” suggested that such awareness progressively waned, such that:

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.¹²

Prior to adulthood, the child mind, with its innate receptivity to divine things, is tutored by a sacramental nature. Thus, writing in 1781, a Scottish writer (strikingly at odds with his Calvinist compatriots) optimistically observed, “Children are especially susceptible of instruction with regard to natural religion. The being of a God, and the worship due to him being engraved on the mind, make a branch of our nature,” concluding: “It is easy to fortify in children the belief of a Deity, because his existence is engraved on the human heart.”¹³ Anticipating mid-Victorian criticism of religious education, the author expresses a MacDonalidian sentiment:

Religious education thus carried on, instead of inspiring gloominess, and despondence, will contribute more than any other means to serenity of mind and cheerfulness of temper. . . . Surely

10. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 62.

11. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 63.

12. Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, 142.

13. “Education with Respect to Religion,” 149.

any frightful notion of the Deity, must have a dismal effect on a tender mind, susceptible of every impression, of fear above all.¹⁴

Rowland credits Scottish Romanticism with providing much of the foundation for the Romantic discourse on childhood, noting that the work of Adam Smith and John Millar did much to reinforce the equation of antiquity with childhood. Emphasizing the developmental nature of society, the ancient savage was seen both as a childhood figure at the dawn of civilization and as an “elder”—a repository of ancient wisdom. Such views informed the view of the child mind as ancient well before ideas of evolutionary recapitulation. Most writers in the wake of Locke, Rowland argues, “embrace a theory of infancy and development that allow them to compare child and savage.” Primitive man is a “big baby,” and childhood language is that of the savage.¹⁵

“Savage” childhood language and behavior implied two things: first, inexperience, meaning that new words had to be invented (or old ones recycled) every time a new experience was encountered; and second, emotional displays unchecked by the constraints of civilization. Thus imagination was “closely associated with the ignorance and inexperience of infancy,” and was something that civilized people grew out of.¹⁶ In a phrase that MacDonald would have applauded, Rowland observes: “Infancy thus represents an embodied imaginative state.”¹⁷

The Romantic Theology of Childhood

Those such as Presbyterian Samuel Law Wilson concluded that they and MacDonald worshipped different deities.¹⁸ Do the claims of Romanticism (and the child in particular) justify such a conclusion?

Judith Plotz thinks so—that the Romantic obsession with the ideal nature-communing child led to its deification. Schiller (an influence on MacDonald),¹⁹ she argues, contributed to this by insisting on the child’s mediatory role through its affinity with a nature conceived as virgin and untainted by culture—a mediation “affording us a retrospective view of

14. “Education with Respect to Religion,” 149

15. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 81, 88.

16. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 91.

17. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 95.

18. See pages 27–28.

19. *Rampolli* contains nineteen pages of Schiller in translation.

ourselves, and revealing more closely the unnatural in us.”²⁰ Aligning the child mind with nature, beyond the vicissitudes of history and the corruption of culture, places it in a virgin territory of immutability and timeless antiquity. Age and infancy are again conflated. Coleridge’s musings in “Frost at Midnight” over the young Hartley sleeping at his side reflect this: the baby merges with nature, “wander[ing] like a breeze by lakes and sandy shores,” listening to the “eternal language which thy God utters.”

While Coleridge is firmly wedded to a Christian God, Plotz is unsure about his successors. She points to a common Romantic trope of a make-believe kingdom presided over by a child-redeemer. Whether the creations of children or adult authors,²¹ The Child, instead of merely connecting to a higher power, becomes that power, a permeating life-giving force—an idolatrous concept transplanted into the real world. “As an imaginary kingdom,” she writes, “it is almost always figured as a lost garden paradise presided over by a child-redeemer or child-idol: ‘Infancy is the perpetual Messiah which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise.’”²²

In Plotz’s view, it is but a short step from adulation of the concept of the quintessential child to worship of *The Child*—a being “who figures powerfully in Golden Age children’s literature, especially male-authored fantasy literature.”²³ The Romantic discourse on childhood

made it easy, unavoidable almost, to assume the living reality and splendor of such an essential being as *The Child*, who is unmarked by time, place, class, or gender but is represented as in all places and all times the same.²⁴

We will consider later what relationship MacDonald’s Child-God has to the child of Romanticism, but I suggest that Plotz’s theology of *The Child* seems somewhat overstated: practical belief in “the living reality and splendor of such an essential being as *The Child*” seems unlikely. It seems more reasonable to accept Rowland’s evaluation of the “ideal

20. Friedrich von Schiller quoted in Plotz, *Romanticism*, 7.

21. De Quincey, Thomas Malkin, Hartley Coleridge, the Brontës, and James Barrie are listed. See Plotz, *Romanticism*, 3.

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted in Plotz, *Romanticism*, 3.

23. Plotz, *Romanticism*, 4.

24. Plotz, *Romanticism*, 5.

child” as a motif for expressing interiority and innocence—it evokes a “natural” state, and an interior, remembered existence.²⁵

The preoccupation with childhood (at least in print) was very much a middle- and upper-class affair. Plotz’s main case is that Romanticism was characterized by a higher-class aloofness from real social issues combined with an incorrigible idealism. This was no doubt true, but it seems excessive to accept Alan Yue’s claim that “there are no children in Wordsworth’s poetry”²⁶ or that the Romantics were bereft of any real understanding of childhood. Plotz does, however, remind us that the Romantic child is essentially a literary symbol, idealized and colored by class prejudices. This explains why many of MacDonald’s child characters appear to hover improbably above their surrounding grime, and is a reminder not to summarily dismiss them without considering their symbolic value.

Class, Gender, and the Child-Mind

The realm of the nursery was female—where even young boys were dressed in petticoats—with little connection with the thrusting male world of commerce and empire. Men knew little of this sequestered “dark heart” of the home which, as evolutionary theories took hold, was seen as a savage place where infant language mirrored that of primeval “man” (or animals), or where (perhaps justifiably) folklore and old wives’ tales held sway over education.²⁷ It was a woman’s place—her highest destiny—and therefore she had little need of education, not least because any energy diverted to her brain was sure to undermine her reproductive ability.²⁸ Fathers were advised to foster a sense of veneration in their daughters on the grounds that “the intimacy bred of taking liberties is a fatal exchange for the deep sense of trustful reverence.” The husband was the “family’s monarch” and advised to “allow his girls to listen to the conversation without expecting to be included in it.”²⁹

25. Plotz, *Romanticism*, 26.

26. Plotz, *Romanticism*, 85.

27. Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood*, 204–5.

28. Shuttleworth writes: “At its most extreme, Clouston and Maudsley and others insisted that the exertion of intellectual energies would seriously impair female reproductive development” (Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 210).

29. “Essays on Practical Education,” 46.

Childhood studies dawned in this world of gender and class division, fueled by strong religious sentiment. Who was this creature at the heart of the nursery that was riddled with original sin or (later in the century) burdened with racial memory, that could speak the language of animal and human ancestors, that was at once innocent and irretrievably corrupt?

It is, perhaps, surprising that childhood studies as a discipline had not developed earlier, considering the Romantic obsession with the child.³⁰ Nevertheless the Romantics did bequeath to the Victorians ideas about the child mind which, at least in the view of Plotz, were entirely misguided. The Romantic obsession with childhood connectedness to nature led to the valuing of *disconnectedness* from adult society. It was considered laudable to shield a child for as long as possible from quotidian reality in order to foster a sense of holism. Plotz, however, citing the work of twentieth-century Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, argues that this prevents the development of a healthy sense of self, observing that “Piaget labels as [mental] defects the very attributes the Romantics cite as excellences.”³¹

Romantic notions of childhood innocence contrasted, in Victorian times, with a preoccupation with original sin and its later correlate, savage racial memory. The child became an accident waiting to happen, and mothers, nurses, and tutors were admonished to watch for signs of incipient decline. Babies, and even the fetus *in utero*, were deemed to be susceptible to madness,³² the first post-natal sign of which was prattling nonsense and an over-fertile imagination, and that uncontrollable malady of *passion* which was to be early nipped in the bud. John Haslam, apothecary to Bethlehem Hospital, who included in his *Observations on Madness and Melancholy* (1809) a chapter on “Cases of Insane Children,”³³ highlights not only the hereditary nature of insanity, but its roots in faulty education—particularly one deficient in morality, here defined as failing to subjugate passions—

30. The science of child development is normally traced to Darwin’s “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant” in the journal *Mind* in 1877. See Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 221.

31. Plotz, *Romanticism*, 28.

32. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 21.

33. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 23.

which often plant in the youthful mind the seeds of madness which the slightest circumstances readily awaken into growth. It should be as much the object of the teachers of youth, to subjugate the passions, as to discipline the intellect.³⁴

While the prevailing view was that childhood make-believe and play (or the even more dreadful secret sins of lying and masturbation—sexual “precocity”) heralded insanity or even death, some had more tolerant views. The *Cambridge University Magazine*, for example, reports as early as 1841 that “the common idea of the imagination is, we believe, far below its true elevation,” and traces misconceptions to “too slight attentions to the real operations of the mind,” and a propensity to divide mental processes artificially. It advises:

Away with this cold “cutting up” of that glorious *unity* called MIND; of whose several kinds and species of *operation* are so inseparably linked together, and harmoniously blended.³⁵

These sentiments presage, as we shall see, later Victorian liberalism. Nevertheless, the subjugation of the passions and the discipline of the intellect is a familiar refrain permeating the early Victorian narrative and was the primary goal of education.

Mid-Century Debate and Religious Education

By mid-century, secularization and the growing awareness of child psychology were influencing educational debates. Questions were raised about whether Sunday schools should teach secular subjects, whether state schools should teach religion, whether children should be forced to learn quickly or allowed to “flower” naturally, or, indeed, whether schooling (for the poor) was necessary at all. On the basis that “the whole theological world” was in disarray, in 1875, the religiously skeptical *Westminster Review* questioned the wisdom of “enthraling children’s minds with the fetters of doubtful doctrine.”³⁶ This polemic against the “religionists,” caricaturing educational practices over the previous decades, reveals popular views.

34. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 23

35. “Literature and Imagination,” 58.

36. “Religious Education of Children,” 377.

Anglicanism is targeted by considering E. B. Ramsay's *Manual of Catechetical Instruction*. The methodology is forensic, even inquisitorial, with rote learning seen as the route to forming much-needed "precise and correct ideas." Ramsay claims that three of the questions "involve an abstract of the whole theory of Coleridge's 'Aids to Reflection.'"³⁷ Noting that the work is aimed at seven- to ten-year-olds, this draws a predictably sarcastic reaction:

Those who are conversant with this eminently philosophical work will be able to estimate the adaptability of the "Manual" to the mental calibre of the young.³⁸

There is "a total disregard of the principles of psychology," and children are left with "the impression that salvation depends on correctly remembering words that convey no possible meaning."³⁹ Ramsay, admitting that "it must appear as if directed to the head," nevertheless wants to foster "tender feeling [in] his young pupils, and to call forth the emotions of the heart,"⁴⁰ but the *Review* is quick to point out that it is liable to have the opposite effect. Passages concerning guilt and damnation are especially injurious to young girls of a nervous disposition who are apt to "dwell much on anything which might raise a misgiving or an anxiety." Expressing George MacDonald's view, the conclusion is: "The power of imagination is not sufficiently taken into account in dealing with the young."⁴¹

The negative psychological effects of the religious indoctrination of children were a topic of current debate. The *Review* cites a medical report claiming that religious fervor accounted for 3 percent of admissions to mental asylums,⁴² leading to the conclusion that learning half-understood statements concerning the awful consequences of disobedience leads to mental breakdown in the young.⁴³ This catechetical approach, however, was more likely to produce boredom and frustration than madness. The liberal Unitarian journal *The Theological Review* notes in passing, while discussing Sunday schools, that:

37. Ramsay, *Manual of Catechetical Instruction*, xvii.

38. "Religious Education of Children," 377.

39. "Religious Education of Children," 379.

40. Ramsay, *Manual of Catechetical Instruction*, xix.

41. "Religious Education of Children," 381.

42. "Religious Education of Children," 383n.

43. Crichton Browne's paper (note 32, page 48) lists, among others, "theomania." See Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 38.

Some of those who have come over from orthodoxy . . . evidently conceive of religious instruction as identical with the inculcation of theological dogmas, and associating these with their painful remembrance of catechisms and creeds, reach a decided conclusion against bringing young scholars, at any rate, under any sort of religious training.⁴⁴

Many parents, it seems, who had suffered under Ramsay's *Manual*, had—for ten years at least—simply refused to subject their children to the same ordeal.

The second example given, however, was more likely to result in madness.⁴⁵ In *Sermons for the Very Young* (1864), “the Deity is habitually represented as an angry judge ready to inflict endless, unutterable tortures upon the trembling and despairing sinner,” and psychological pressure is used to effect conversion by describing “the most horrible scenes [of hell] which cruelty and fanaticism could devise.”⁴⁶ It carries heart-breaking and gruesome tales of God visiting vengeance on sinners, such as the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, who, after retiring one night, are woken by an apocalypse:

What a rumbling sound wakes them from their slumbers? What glare of light breaks into their chambers? Whence the fearful cry—the shriek of horror? The wrath of God is upon them. Do they repent now of their sins? It is too late.⁴⁷

It is preceded by the advice: “Think, little child, of the fearful story.”

The *Review* notes that since it is repeatedly stressed that God does not hear the prayers of sinners, and that “even when we wish to do right there is something wrong in it,”⁴⁸ the child is left with no option but to consider itself eternally damned.⁴⁹ It illustrates the theological belief that a “state of hopeless degradation [is] the normal condition of children,” and results in the destruction of “self respect,” “a sense of guilt,” and “consciousness of an Unseen Power full of anger . . . armed with a fearful

44. “Sunday-Schools,” 79.

45. The mental strain produced by fervent evangelism is discussed further on pages 176–78.

46. “Religious Education of Children,” 382.

47. “Religious Education of Children,” 383.

48. “Religious Education of Children,” 384–85.

49. Charles West (founder of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children) reports, “Some of the most painful death-beds which I have ever witnessed” were the result of such theology (West, *On Some of the Disorders*, 119).

system of punishment”—all of which act negatively on “sympathetic feelings,” “higher aspirations,” and “the moral tone.”⁵⁰

Finally, psychological manipulation of a more “hysterical” nature is exemplified by “The Happy Child and the Wicked Mother” in *Familiar Talks with the Children* (1870), a volume of sentimental tales where saintly, weeping children sacrifice their young lives on behalf of reprobate parents who, in consequence, weep themselves (mothers) or turn from alcohol (fathers).

This article in the *Westminster Review*, though sarcastic and clearly biased, reveals a continuing felt need (among “religionists”) to save the child from itself—to deliver it from its essence, its childlikeness, in processes reminiscent of exorcism. In all these schemes, childhood is valued for its potential, not for its essence—a necessary evil prior to adulthood. Whether couched in commercial or religious terms, the goal of childhood was to escape from it as soon as possible in order to become either a commercial contributor to society (or a fecund mother) or a consenting adult destined for heaven. In the catechetical approach, the goal is for the child to find refuge from itself in the mother Church; the child’s imagination is acknowledged but then virtually ignored, the goal being to supplant childish fancy with adult rationality. The last two methods reflect the Evangelical pressure for a “decision”—an essentially “contractual” act also, ironically, normally reserved for adults. In these cases, the imagination is engaged, but then abused. The “decision” is to turn away from one’s corrupt nature, to renounce oneself. In the words of a mid-century Wesleyan, for example:

It must be remembered that the fault of human nature is not merely weakness—it is *corruption*; and that a renewal cannot spring from any change that intellectual cultivation may effect.⁵¹

Moreover, as we are here discussing the education of children, we are reminded that:

The only armour which is hell-proof is—“*It is written.*” . . . Our wisdom is to wrap the family of man as early as possible in that impenetrable mail.⁵²

50. “Religious Education of Children,” 385.

51. “Shall Religion Be Separated?,” 344.

52. “Shall Religion Be Separated?,” 348.

Notwithstanding the child's immaturity and inherited defects (from Adam, the apes, or merely parents), we are reminded, somewhat ominously, that while the law might regard children as exculpable minors, God does not:

[The Bible's] best promises are made to young people. It tells us of "little ones" who are admitted into covenant with the Lord. It details judgements that have been inflicted on children.⁵³

In contrast, however misguided the Romantics were about the nature of childhood, they nevertheless valued it both as a physical state and a social construct. Although Coleridge does muse poetically over the sleeping Hartley about what he might *become*, there is nevertheless a celebration of who the baby *is*. This contrasts with the (especially male) Victorian impatience with, and distance from, childhood, an impatience which translated into schools bent on forcing their young charges towards premature flowering, "hot-houses" which not only produced early flowering and fruiting, but often an early death. The mid-Victorian years were full of debate as to whether such practices should be tolerated.⁵⁴

In summary, the early- and mid-century consensus among "religionists" was that childlikeness equated to irrationality, emotional instability driven by a surfeit of passion (especially in girls), immorality due to an unregenerate soul (evidenced particularly by the sins of lying and masturbation, both especially feared as they were beyond the sphere of adult control),⁵⁵ and unproductiveness (both commercial and sexual) and therefore of little commercial or social value. In addition, the nonconformist pressure for a "decision" for Christ not only illustrates the negative view of childhood itself, but blurs the boundary between childhood and adulthood:⁵⁶ not only must children make "adult" moral decisions, they must also suffer the penalties for not doing so. Such negative views of childhood, combined with the idea that education should take into account God's pre-ordained social class divisions,⁵⁷ form the

53. "Shall Religion Be Separated?," 348. Of note here is the confusion between covenant and law. See, for example, the discussion in Wright, *Justification*, 71–77.

54. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 107.

55. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 65–66.

56. According to Rowan Williams, a perennial issue. See Williams, *Lost Icons*, 30–31.

57. The Exeter Diocesan Board, for example, felt the need to improve the education of the poor "by making it more efficient in preparing persons for the duties assigned to them by Providence" ("Education on Church Principles," 299). From a Dissenting

backdrop to MacDonald's work. As we will explore, he firmly challenges the former but has a tendency to idealize the latter.

Post-Darwin and *Fin de Siècle* Attitudes to Childhood

The Wesleyan article cited above is a polemical broadside against encroaching secularism peppered with Bible verses flung in anger. It illustrates the vehemence of mid-century debates whose temperature was raised even higher when Darwin published *Origin*. A major front in the battle concerned childhood and children, especially their education, reflecting increasing unease with the doctrine of original sin and growing awareness of child psychology.

Judith Plotz's complaint that Romantic theory had lost touch with reality might well be leveled at much of the Victorian discourse about childhood. The polarity and zealotry of both the Christian and evolutionist/secularist camps is striking when reading Victorian texts. Both sides make strong, often absurd, claims based on scant knowledge of children themselves (the theorists on both sides were primarily male who had little cause to visit the nursery). One thinks, for example, of Adolf Kussmaul's unlikely declaration that infants are born deaf,⁵⁸ or Dr. Louis Robinson's experiments, which consisted of suspending newborns from branches as evidence of simian ancestry,⁵⁹ or of George John Romanes's claim that seven-week-old infants have the intelligence of a mollusk.⁶⁰ It was even suggested that "rock a bye baby in the treetops" offered evidence of our "arboreal ancestry."⁶¹

The growing child study movement was also, at first, reluctant to engage in the messy business of interacting with real children; there was also a widespread tendency to use fictional characters as source material

perspective: "If a man best learns his duty by studying the Scriptures, he certainly must improve his disposition to fulfil his task in 'that state of life to which it has pleased God to call him'" (I. P., "Thoughts" 219).

58. Kussmaul, *Untersuchungen*, 10, 13–14. See also Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 223.

59. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 274.

60. A chart published by Romanes in 1883 showed the human baby as achieving the intelligence of a mollusk at seven weeks, a reptile at four months, and at fourteen weeks to have reached the level of higher Crustacea. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 255.

61. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 363.

for “scientific” child studies, and to accept decidedly apocryphal accounts of child behavior at face value. The latter included a widely-disseminated eighteenth-century account of the “insane baby” that had to be held down by four nurses to prevent it climbing up the nursery walls (evidence of insanity in infants),⁶² and (as late as 1911) a report in a work called *Child Nurture* claimed that “scientific fathers in Germany” had taken to dropping infants from first-floor windows to see if they would land on all fours like a kitten.⁶³ Even the otherwise reasonable James Sully seemed to accept the 1779 account of the famous four-year-old, Christian Heinrich Heineken of Lübeck, as a credible “prodigy of learning”:

Handed over to his tutor whilst still a baby, the infant was said to have mastered the Old Testament by the age of one, the history of the ancient world, universal geography, and Latin by the age of two and a half, and the deeper mysteries of dogmatic theology and ecclesiastical history by the age of four, by which time his fame had spread across Europe.⁶⁴

The use of fictional *literary* texts to provide case histories was also widespread, leading to a symbiotic relationship between scientists and authors with each fueling the others’ output. It is unsurprising that under such conditions strange theories developed, often surrounding the paranoia towards sexual “precocity” that inevitably had a negative effect on the lives of children and included, for example, Isaac Baker Brown performing clitoridectomies on girls as young as ten to cure them of insanity.⁶⁵ However misguided, such theorizing and practice demonstrates awareness and exploration of this newly-discovered continent called “childhood” embedded in the heart of society. The child was a hot topic.

Saint, Sinner, or Savage?

The eighteenth-century Romantic notion of the child mind as a blank slate on whose virgin surface nature writes divine truth created the saintly child; a positive, if naive, construction of childhood. The ascendancy of the Puritan emphasis on original sin among Protestant Evangelicals

62. James Crichton-Browne quoted in Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 22.

63. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 246.

64. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 146.

65. Until 1866, when expelled from the Obstetrical Society. See Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 36.

in the nineteenth century created the sinner child, placing a social burden on children, now constantly watched by their guardians for signs of incipient sin (or insanity), and drilled by the Catechism or its nonconformist equivalent, memorizing Bible verses. MacDonald's literary image of the sadistic schoolmaster dramatizes the pressure on children. Henry Maudsley, in a chapter entitled "Insanity in Early Life" in *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (1868)—"one of the first accounts that placed childhood mental disorders in an evolutionary perspective"⁶⁶—records the imprisonment of a schoolmaster for beating a child to death (in his view an insane child),⁶⁷ and notes occurrences of mania linked to religious fervor:

A boy of about eleven years of age who came under my care . . . moved about restlessly, throwing his arms about and repeating over and over again such expressions as—"The good Lord Jesus," "They put Him on the cross," "They nailed His hands," &c: it was impossible to fix his attention for a moment.⁶⁸

Clearly the pressure on real children from this philosophical page-turn was not positive.

Despite making confident medical pronouncements, Maudsley's work reveals a more ambivalent attitude to the *cause* of immoral behavior, as if feeling his way in the uncertain territory opened up by Darwin. On the one hand, childhood insanity is caused by original sin or demons:⁶⁹

To talk about the purity and innocence of a child's mind is a part of that . . . poetical idealism and willing hypocrisy by which a man ignores realities. . . . By nature sinful above everything, and desperately wicked [Jer 17:9], man acquires a knowledge of good through evil.⁷⁰

66. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 181.

67. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 328–29.

68. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 313–14.

69. Quoted is an account, from one "Griesinger from Kerner," of a girl of eleven, a "pious Christian child," who, in "a deep bass voice . . . kept repeating the words, 'They are praying for thee.' . . . On the evening of the 22nd January another voice, quite different from the bass one, spoke incessantly while the crisis lasted . . . now and then interrupted by the former bass voice regularly repeating the recitative. . . . What, however, gave a distinctive character to its expressions was the moral or rather immoral tone of them—pride, arrogance, scorn, and hatred of truth, God, Christ, that were declared. The situation was resolved when a voice cried out [from the girl]—'Get thee out of this girl, thou unclean spirit'" (Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 317–18).

70. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 322.

In other words, God will use evil such that humans evolve morally. On the other hand, he recognizes the role of hereditary and evolutionary factors: the infant has “the latent power of an actual evolution which no monkey ever has; in it is contained . . . the influence of all mankind that has gone before.”⁷¹ Whether inherited from Adam or the apes, depravity was nevertheless seen as the nascent state of the child.

Imagination and Insanity in Childhood

Mid-century child psychology saw “adult sanity [as] dependent on the ruthless control of imaginative visions within childhood.”⁷² Maudsley, Shuttleworth argues, compounded the negative views of childhood imagination by associating it with animal savagery. Using Coleridge’s terminology but rejecting his theology, he equates childhood fantasy with animal passions:

The instincts, appetites, or passions, call them as we may, manifest themselves in unblushing, extreme, and perverted action; the veil of any control which discipline may have fashioned is rent; the child is as the animal, and reveals its animal nature with as little shamefacedness as the monkey indulges its passions in the face of all the world.⁷³

Elsewhere Maudsley makes it clear that childish passion is no more than an animal reaction to an external stimulus:

Children and savages best exhibit in a naked simplicity the different passions that result from the affectation of self by what, when painful, is deemed an ill; when pleasurable, a good.⁷⁴

The terms “unblushing,” “indulging passions in the face of all the world,” and “naked simplicity” clearly reinforce the association of sexual curiosity with mental disease (apparently ignoring the fact that young children have very little interest in sexuality). There is also the blurring of the boundary between normal and pathological childlike behavior: Maudsley appears to equate normal childhood—certainly infancy—with

71. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 333.

72. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 45.

73. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 322. See also Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 182.

74. Maudsley, *Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 150.

insanity. Some thirty years later, Havelock Ellis suggested that criminals were those trapped in a savage evolutionary stage by arrested development: in a case of guilt by association, children were now viewed (at least potentially) as insane *and* criminal. Shuttleworth remarks that:

Ellis, building on these theories, argued that moral insanity in the child, exhibited through eccentricity, lying, bad sexual habits, and cruelty to animals, was the first stage of “instinctive criminality.” As for Maudsley, children were closer to the animal or savage state than adults, and the insane child even more so.⁷⁵

Charles West (founder of Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital) offered a more benign view of childhood imagination. Noting the terror experienced by children facing death that had been over-zealously catechized or evangelized, he sympathizes with their emotional turmoil:

The dark grave is realised, or, at least, imagined more vividly than its conqueror; and the little child [is] driven to look within for the evil which it does not know, and cannot find, but vaguely dreads, and would be sorry for if it knew it.⁷⁶

Undeveloped reasoning powers in a child, he argues, lead to “exaggerated . . . perceptive faculties [and] a vividness of . . . imagination.” Because of this, “the griefs of childhood may be, in proportion to the child’s power of bearing them, as overwhelming as those which break the strong man down,”⁷⁷ leading to a plea for compassion:

These facts deserve special attention; they prove how much more the susceptibility and sensitiveness of children need to be taken into consideration than is commonly done. This keenness of the emotions in children displays itself in other ways, and has constantly to be borne in mind in our management of them.⁷⁸

West closes his lecture by suggesting that the only thing which offers any hope for the suffering child is that Jesus welcomed children into his arms despite their not having learned the Creed or professed faith.

West’s criticism as a Catholic of what we would now call fundamentalist Christianity, his Romantic leanings, his qualified acceptance of Darwinism while insisting on “a perfection to be attained not here,

75. Shuttleworth, *Mind of the Child*, 183n8, 206.

76. West, *On Some of the Disorders*, 119.

77. West, *On Some of the Disorders*, 127.

78. West, *On Some of the Disorders*, 128.

but higher,”⁷⁹ represent a liberal middle road which contrasts with the polarized views discussed. Of note is the rejection of inherent depravity in childhood, however caused, replacing this with a more nuanced understanding of the causes and power of childhood passions, underscored by a belief in a benevolent God.

The Nineteenth-Century Child

We have considered the Victorian child as a social construct, a literary device, and a theological metaphor. None may directly bear on the biological and psychological state we call childhood, but all contribute to a theological anthropology and, inasmuch as the child bears the *imago Dei*, in some measure touch on views regarding God’s nature. Protestant Evangelicalism, however, tended to focus on the distortion, even obliteration, of that *imago*. The focus on original sin and the corresponding development of a religious “forcing apparatus” to drive this out of the child is, in some measure, a denial of the humanity of the child. It says that the child is something “other” which, without intervention, will grow into something subhuman.

A contrast has emerged between Romantic views of a benign nature nurturing the innocent child-mind and Puritan ideas disdainful of such optimism. However, it must be noted that these two opposing ideologies were always present: “Most scholars agree that Evangelical ideology held firmer sway in the early years of the century while the romantic gradually gained influence, yet both existed at the same time to varying degrees.”⁸⁰ In the next chapter we will consider more closely the Victorian theology of childhood and MacDonald’s particular contribution to the debate.

79. West, *On Some of the Disorders*, 133.

80. Sutphin, “Victorian Childhood,” 54.