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The Child in Poetry: Foundlings, Lostlings, Changelings

MARGARET REYNOLDS
Queen Mary, University of London

Displacements, Diagonals

TO BEGIN WITH A POEM. This is from *The Usborne Book of Poems for Young Children*. It is by Anon, and it is called 'Strange Story'.

I saw a pigeon making bread
I saw a girl composed of thread
I saw a towel one mile square
I saw a meadow in the air
I saw a rocket walk a mile
I saw a pony make a file
I saw a blacksmith in a box
I saw an orange kill an ox
I saw a butcher made of steel
I saw a penknife dance a reel
I saw a sailor twelve feet high
I saw a ladder in a pie
I saw an apple fly away
I saw a sparrow making hay
I saw a farmer like a dog
I saw a puppy mixing grog
I saw three men who saw these too
And will confirm what I tell you.[1]

Read at the Academy 26 May 2005.

[1] *The Usborne Book of Poems for Young Children*, chosen by Philip Hawthorn, illustrated by Cathy Shimmen, edited by Sam Taplin (London, 2004), p. 61.

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Depending on how familiar you are with poetry as bedtime reading, or how quickly your eye adjusts the space to make sense out of nonsense, then you will see how to read this poem of displacements. ('I saw a pigeon' is the odd phrase out: otherwise each first half line connects to the second half line above—'I saw a girl . . . | making bread' etc.)

To go with that poem that works on the idea of displacement and diversion, here is another digression, another 'strange story' about 'out of place'. In 2004 the popular radio journalist, Nicky Campbell, published a memoir. His title was *Blue Eyed Son* and the first line reads: 'I was committing adultery in Room 634 of the Holiday Inn in Birmingham when my wife rang to say they'd found my mother.'[2]

It is a deliberately flaunting first line. Everything is inappropriate: the wife (let alone the mother), suddenly intrudes into this scene of illicit sex. But a glance at the sub-title of Campbell's book makes clear why his tactic is legitimate. For this is *The Story of an Adoption.* The mother—whose own secret sexual life had led to his birth—had just been traced, found, named, for the first time, for the son who had never known her.

Of course, Campbell means to shock. He is a journalist. But it may be that his pressurised sense of contradiction—paradox, lack of propriety—is one that appeals to him because it connects to something in himself. As an adopted child, taken far from where he began, and placed in an elsewhere to which he does (and does not) belong, which he conceives (but which is not where he was conceived), his keynote is displacement.

Displacement explains how to read the anonymous riddle poem 'Strange Story'. It is a double text. The nonsense version set out on the page makes poetic sense because poetry deals in figurative substitutions and unlikely comparisons: 'I saw a pigeon making bread'. But the good sense version is still there—provided the reader chooses to see it: 'I saw a girl . . . | making bread'. One is Nonsense, and the other is Sense, but neither one quite obliterates the other, and readers—young and old—are entirely capable of keeping both patterns in focus at once.

[2] Nicky Campbell, *Blue-Eyed Son: The Story of an Adoption* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2004), p. 1.

I. Foundlings

Displaced children

This lecture is about children out of place. It is about how children in general, from the eighteenth century onwards, came to be seen as always out of place, somewhere other. And it is about how poetry images and repeats that displacement. To begin with, I will talk about Foundlings. I will be going on to Lostlings, and to Changelings, but in each case I am dealing with the doubles and puns, with the strange presences and uncanny absences that mark physical, emotional and social displacements.

Since the 1960s and the publication of the pioneering work of Philippe Ariès, many scholars and cultural critics have accepted the notion of the 'invention' of childhood taking place at around the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century.[3] Before that—goes the argument—very small children were construed as null. They were devoid of value until they had survived infancy. Thereafter, they were regarded as small adults, subject to the same social expectations in relation to the exploitation of their labour, their commodification, and their imaginative world view. They wore smaller versions of the same adult clothes, and they functioned as adjuncts of their parents' lives.

But then, after that key historical moment, Ariès and his followers proposed that a special place was accorded to children which was supposed to set apart the world of the child, usually in a pastoral setting, and blank and untrammelled. However problematic this argument, it is certainly true that the 'simplicity school' of childhood and children was so effective in its propaganda from the eighteenth century onwards, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries especially, that for many years scholars working on literature written on, for and by children, felt themselves constrained to argue against continuing notions of the 'easiness' of children's literature.[4] But no literary work exists entirely independent of its context; all writing is complicated by the particular historical and cultural frameworks that produced it. This is true for the

[3] Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960: English trans., New York, 1962). See also Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York, 1977) and Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1978).

[4] See Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Introduction', in Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *New Approaches to Children's Literature* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2004), pp. 1–3.

many works written on, for and by children that began to be published from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

There was a great deal more of this material than might be imagined. Remember that there were at this time comparatively few literate adults in the likely reading audience—let alone children. But this was the beginning of the print explosion and the exploitation of mass marketing, and there are some critics who argue that, far from this being the moment when attitudes to children changed, it was simply the moment when children *became visible* in popular culture and in literature.[5]

If this is so, then it seems that there are two ways of testing that 'visibility': one is through examining specific moments in their historical circumstances and settings, and the other is through the reading of the literary texts which cluster around those specific moments. In this lecture I am going to discuss three key dates: 1739, 1872 and 1926. Weaving through those landmarks, I am going to map out a literary journey, if not a social progression. I am going to argue that, while it is undoubtedly true that the literature, especially those kinds of literature associated with a topic such as this, which has the potential for arousing extreme reaction and emotion, was clearly affected by the historical and social events that I will describe, the resulting literature *itself* promoted a vision and a set of commonplaces and shared values that led, in its turn, to the historical projects and legislation that were to follow.

I will come back to an explanation of the many meanings in my title later on. But for now, suffice to say that this lecture is about how ideas on children formed poetry, but also about how poetry formed ideas about children.

The texts

The Opie Collection of Children's Literature held at the Bodleian Library contains some 545 titles for poetry and verse alone in the pre-1850 section. These include educational works like Lucy Aikin's *Poetry for Young Children consisting of short pieces to be committed to Memory* (1801), works of moral instruction like Mary Elliott Belson's *Gems in the Mine: or, the Tracts and Habits of Childhood in Verse* (1824), nursery rhymes, hymns, and entertainment, including a large number of volumes of verse written by children themselves and published (usually) by indulgent

[5] See for instance Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent–Child Relationships from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 269.

parents like *The Album of Emily and Isabella* (1831) or *Lizzy's Poems and Pictures for her Young Friends* (1857), or by grieving relatives such as Jamima Gordon's *Juvenile Poems* (1819), composed by a girl who died aged 12.

Among the many well-known authors appearing in this collection are Sara Coleridge, Ann and Jane Taylor, Christopher Smart, Cecil Frances Alexander, Mary Howitt, Charles and Mary Lamb and Caroline Norton. If the idea of childhood was (perhaps) in its infancy, so too was the literature of childhood. Quite unlike the large format picture books produced for children today, *Tommy Thumb's Song-Book for all Little Masters and Misses, Gammer Gurton's Garland of Nursery Songs,* or *Cottage Tales for Little People or the Amazing Repository for all Good Boys and Girls* were tiny—often little pamphlets only about one inch by two inches, and with miniature engravings to match.

Divine Songs

But there were two publications from the eighteenth century, which were revised and reprinted again and again and which set the tone for the style of much of the poetry that was to follow. One of these was Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs for the Use of Children* first published in 1715. This collection opens with 'A General Song of Praise to God', 'Praise for Creation and Providence', 'Praise to God for our Redemption', 'Praise for Mercies Spiritual and Temporal', and 'Praise for Birth in a Christian Land', each one presented in the voice of an everlastingly grateful child. Here is 'Praise for Mercies Spiritual and Temporal':

> Whene'er I take my walks abroad,
> How many poor I see!
> What shall I render to my God
> For all his gifts to me?
>
> Not more than others I deserve,
> Yet God hath given me more;
> For I have food, while others starve,
> Or beg from door to door.
>
> How many children in the street,
> Half-naked I behold!
> While I am cloth'd from head to feet,
> And cover'd from the cold.
>
> While some poor wretches scarce can tell,
> Where they may lay their head;

I have a home wherein to dwell,
And rest upon my bed.

While others early learn to swear,
And curse, and lie, and steal;
Lord, I am taught thy name to fear,
And do thy holy will.

Are these thy favours day by day
To me above the rest?
Then let me love thee more than they,
And try to serve thee best.[6]

This poem, like others in the collection, is interesting not so much for its conventional pieties—the succinct introduction to the first, third, ninth and eighth Commandments is particularly impressive—but for the fact that it does introduce something new to poetry—the voice of a child, and a child who observes other children. What is also new here—though it is so familiar to us now as to make it virtually invisible—is the idea of the intense urbanisation, the web of narrow streets and close rooms. It is only because of the sudden springing up of ragged suburbs, with hundreds of people living in confined quarters, that the child can see so much in a 'walk abroad'; that beggars can go 'from door to door'; that children can be seen 'in the street'; and that 'poor wretches' can be forced into rapid change of lodging with no responsibility being taken for them either by the community or the state.[7]

Mother Goose

The other important children's book, also remaining long in print, was *Mother Goose's Melody or Sonnets for the Cradle,* printed from the papers of the well-known publisher John Newbery (with the selection and arrangement attributed to Oliver Goldsmith) and first appearing about the end of 1780. It was not the first book of nursery rhymes—that was *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* published in 1744—but *Mother Goose* was the most popular.[8]

[6] Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, 13th edn. (1715: Richard Ford at the Angel in the Poultry, London, 1735), no. 4.
[7] The 1835 'New Edition' includes engraved illustrations of streets and close walls which are still more explicitly realised: see Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, 13th edn. (1715: R. Miller, London, 1835), no. 4.
[8] *Songs for the Nursery, or Mother Goose's Melodies* was reportedly published in Boston in 1719 but, according to Marina Warner, this is a 'ghost' volume and no copy has ever been found. It

The order and selection of the rhymes varies in the many different versions of the volume, but generally in the late eighteenth century the order of the poems goes: 'A Love Song'—about a 'little man' who asks a 'little maid' to marry him, 'A Dirge', about Betty Winckle's pig who died—whereupon so did she, 'A Melancholy Song', a warning from a mother about the dangers risked by girls going abroad—'she bid me tread lightly, | And come again quickly, | For fear the young men should do me some harm', and 'Cross patch': 'Cross patch, draw the latch, | sit by the fire and spin; Take a cup and drink it up, | Then call the neighbours in.' Over and again the concerns of the rhymes are the same: sex, death, procreation, anxiety over food, clothing and housing, and, perhaps above all, a preoccupation with social exchange perhaps brought on by an awareness of the dangers of living in the urban environment.

Though both Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs* and *Mother Goose* were advertised and promoted as for the use of children, they are clearly also designed to appeal to the adults who were to buy them and use them. Grown ups as well as children appear in the woodcuts that head each poem or rhyme. In the images for editions of Watts's volume they are often portrayed supervising the child's education or catechism. In *Mother Goose* they alternate between comic figures with hooked noses and sprouting hairs, and comfortable-looking mothers or nurses. But the assumed presence of an adult reader and an adult sensibility is most clear in those editions of *Mother Goose* which include a satirical and usually wholly irrelevant 'moral' to conclude each rhyme. As with the Disney film *Shrek II*, there is a sophisticated double layering of relevance designed to keep the interest of both those doing the reading (the adults) and those to whom they are reading (the children).

One subject that haunted the eighteenth century was of interest to both adults and children alike and appears even in these pages. Watts's child-speaker in 'Praise for Mercies Spiritual & Temporal' does not specifically mention babies—abandoned babies, babies wrapped in paper or rags, left in doorways, on church steps, by bridges, or in market

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was followed by another similar title published by John Newbery in London, *Mother Goose's Melody, or Sonnets for the Cradle* (London, 1765). Many later versions include *Mother Goose's Quarto, or Melodies Complete* (Boston, *c*.1825). See Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Lulling, Scaring and Making Mock* (1998: London, 2000), p. 195. See also Nigel Tattersfield, introduction to the facsimile of a 1780 edition in the Bodleian Library, Douce Adds. 36 (3), *Mother Goose's Melody or, Sonnets for the Cradle,* with the original wood engravings by Thomas Bewick (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1–5.

thoroughfares—but Watts's readers knew that this was a common contemporary phenomenon lying behind his poem.

It was not so much that people were having more children for which they could or would not care. Nor was this excess of abandoned infants due to the failure of the Poor Law, the harsh conditions of the workhouse, or even the public opprobrium meted out to illegitimates and unchaste mothers—though of course all of these were factors. Rather, it was the fact of the rapid expansion of urban dwelling. Even today, this is still the case. In those countries where (whether for reasons political—as in China with its one-child policy combined with a preference for boys, or social—as in India with its anxiety about the need to provide dowries for daughters) children are relinquished in this extreme way (whether wanted or not by their parents). They are, typically, carried by country-dwelling parents away from their village and the small community where pregnancy makes a coming baby all too visible, to the nearest city, to be left in places of public resort (markets, bridges, big shops) in the hopes that in a populous area the babies will soon be seen and rescued.[9]

In 1720, five years after the first publication of Watts's *Divine Hymns*, Thomas Coram found himself semi-retired, without regular employment, living on the outskirts of London and making frequent trips to the City. He began to notice the children by the roadside 'exposed, sometimes alive, sometimes dead, and sometimes dying'—all of them displaced, separated from their biological, and often geographical, origin.

Born in Lyme in Dorset in 1668, Coram trained as a shipwright, worked with modest success in New England, and returned to Britain to attempt various philanthropic projects for the American colonies. When these failed, he looked nearer home and by 1722 had made up his mind to do something about the problem of exposed babies. Coram encountered many difficulties in gaining influential support for his project, even though there were a number of such establishments for abandoned infants abroad—in Florence, in Paris, and in Amsterdam. That in Rome had been going since 1185, while that in Dublin was just being set up and would finally be established under the auspices of the Workhouse in 1730.

[9] Many letters and personal testimonies attest to this in the pages of the newsletters published by such independent support organisations as OASIS (Overseas Adoption Support and Information Service), the Inter-Country Adoption Centre and CACH (Children Adopted from China). See also Emily Prager, *WuHu Diary: The Mystery of my Daughter Lulu* (London, 2001), Karin Evans, *The Lost Daughters of China: Abandoned Girls, Their Journey to America, and the Search for a Missing Past* (New York, 2000), and Emily Buchanan, *From China with Love: A Long Road to Motherhood* (Chichester, 2006).

But Coram persisted, and in 1739 the Governors of the 'Hospital for the Maintenance of Exposed and Deserted Young Children' held their first meeting. In 1741 the first children were received into what became popularly known as 'the Foundling Hospital'.[10]

In spite of this seventeen-year delay, the Foundling Hospital rapidly captured the imagination of the public. Fashionable ladies came to view it on the regularly appointed days when distressed mothers could present themselves to beg admission for their child. Whole families would attend at the Chapel to watch the orphans pray, and then go on to watch them consume their strictly frugal diet in the dining hall. As Isaac Watts's ever popular *Divine Songs* remained in print well into the nineteenth century there were doubtless not a few well-off children who had the lessons of their visit to the Hospital reiterated with a bracing Sunday reading of his 'Praise for Mercies Spiritual and Temporal'.

The publicity attending Coram's venture is usually attributed to the extraordinary success of the institution in attracting support from well-known artists and musicians. William Hogarth was a dedicated supporter: he designed the Hospital's seal, painted a major portrait of Coram, regularly included images of infants 'lost'—or should that be 'found'?—in his famous engravings, as well as fostering children both at his own expense and in his own home. Even more famously, Handel gave concerts, including parts of *Messiah*, at the Foundling Hospital which were attended by the whole fashionable world. The Hospital still owns a fair copy of the manuscript bequeathed by the composer.[11]

But more was at stake here. The rise of print culture—books and engravings—combined with the shock of urbanisation, its close ways of living and the resulting new visibility of children in the streets and byways of towns—destitute or otherwise—meant that the idea of the Foundling Hospital rapidly entered the popular imagination. By these

[10] For Thomas Coram see Gillian Wagner, *Thomas Coram: Gent: 1668–1751* (Woodbridge, 2004). For Italy see 'The Lives of Foundlings in Nineteenth-Century Italy' by David I. Kertzer and 'Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence: Changing Patterns of Abandonment, Care and Mortality' by Pier Paolo Viazzo, Maria Bortolotto and Andrea Zanotto, both in Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith (eds.), *Abandoned Children* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 41–56 and pp. 70–91. For Ireland, see Joseph Robins, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1980). In the process of setting up his 'darling project' Thomas Coram requested and received information about similar projects in the cities of Amsterdam and Paris. These documents are still in the Foundling Hospital collection: see Wagner, *Thomas Coram*, p. 136.

[11] See Wagner, *Thomas Coram*, on Hogarth, pp. 135, 139–42, 184 and on Handel, pp. 130, 165, 182–3. See also *The Foundling Museum Guidebook* (London, 2004), pp. 22–6, 52, 60, 74, 78.

means, and because of these facts, children were seen anew as vulnerable, unformed (and yet about to be formed), and society as a whole might be held responsible for their welfare. The connections between the Hospital and literature are borne out by some cross-fertilising stories. The Hospital went into the imagination of the literary world, and the worlds of poetry and fiction came into the Hospital.

The Foundling Hospital for Wit

In 1743, just four years after the official establishment of the Foundling Hospital, a new popular magazine appeared allegedly edited by one Samuel Silence and called *The Foundling Hospital for Wit.* Its title page declared that this was

> The
> Foundling Hospital
> for
> WIT,
> INTENDED
> For the Reception and Preservation of
> such Brats of WIT and HUMOUR,
> whose Parents chuse to drop them.
> CONTAINING
> All the SATIRES, ODES, BALLADS, EPIGRAMS, &c.
> that have been wrote since the Change of the Ministry, many of which have never before been printed.[12]

An elaborate Preface set out the aims of this new publication in terms borrowed from the language of the Royal Charter that enacted the founding of the Hospital itself. That 'Samuel Silence' could so clearly expect his audience to recognise these terms is one thing. Even more important are the ironic ways in which he uses the well known facts of the plague of abandoned infants so common in London life at this period, and as reported day after day in the newspapers and the courts:[13]

> The Royal Charter of Apollo and the Muses, for Establishing an HOSPITAL for the Reception and Preservation of such Brats of WIT and HUMOUR, whose Parents chuse to drop them.
> Apollo, *God of Wit, Father of Light, King of* Parnassus, *and all the*

[12] *The Foundling Hospital for Wit,* Number 1. To be continued Occasionally (London: Printed 1743, Reprinted for W. WEBB, near St. Paul's, M DCC LXIII), title page.
[13] See Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720–1900* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1–5.

> *Territories thereunto belonging; to all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting.*
>
> WHEREAS our Trusty and Well-beloved Subject Samuel Silence, Gentleman, in Behalf of great Numbers of *Mental Infants* daily exposed to Destruction, has, by his Petition, humbly represented unto us, that many Persons of WIT and HUMOUR of both Sexes, being sensible of the frequent Murders committed on these beautiful Infants by the inhuman Custom of exposing them to perish and starve in the common News Papers, or to be bury'd and suffocated in Dunghils of Trash in the Monthly Magazines, have, by the Instruments of Writing, declared their Intentions to contribute liberally towards the erecting and supporting an Hospital for the Reception and Preservation of such exposed and deserted Productions, as soon as We should be graciously pleased to grant our Letters Patent for the good Purpose . . .

The editor was surnamed 'Silence' because—like the Foundling Hospital itself—he undertook absolute discretion in relation to the provenance and heritage of such literary progeny as came under his hand, advising 'such modest Parents as would dispose of their Issue privately, that Letters directed for *Samuel Silence*, Esq; [were] to be left at *Brown's* Coffee House in *Spring Gardens*'. Also, in the manner of the practice at the Hospital, he took to himself the 'full and sole Power to refuse whatever Brats he shall think proper, particularly such as shall be judged infected with any dangerous Distemper, as also all misshapen, weak, or sickly Productions, neither such as are untoward, wicked, and licentious: forasmuch as the Admission of such might tend to Disgrace of our *Hospital*, and change what was intended as a Nursery for spritely and beautiful Infants, into an Infirmary for Invalids'.[14]

The verses collected in *The Foundling Hospital for Wit* were, for the most part, political and social satire directed against eminent men and women. One copy in the Bodleian Library has names filled into the blanks, among them Pitt, Walpole and the Duchess of Marlborough. The publication continued for six issues to 1764, then ceased until a new edition began to be published, *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, running

[14] *The Foundling Hospital for Wit* (London, 1743), pp. i-iv. The Preface goes on: 'And finally we will, for the universal Encouragement of all our loving Subjects, in the delightful Occupation of begetting Children, that whether their Offspring shall speak in the musical and sublime Language of Rhime, or in the plain and natural Cadence of Prose; whether they shall appear in the finer Dress of Epistles, Satires, Odes, Songs, and Epigrams; or in the plain and modest Garb of Letters and Essays, they shall be equally fitted an Apartment in this our *Hospital*, and as carefully attended and provided for, as if they were under the Eye of their own dear Parents.'

from 1768 to 1773 and this time with contributions from Lord Chesterfield, Lord Lyttelton, Mr Garrick, Dr Akenside, Elizabeth Carter and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

Tokens and tags

At the Foundling Hospital itself, many parents left their infants with tokens and tags to assist in later recognition and acknowledgement (Fig. 1). Some would also leave poems as a way of expressing and dignifying their loss. Each of these was scrupulously preserved by the institution—though they were never restored to the child. One such, about a male child reckoned to be about fourteen days old, was discovered on 10 May 1759. A scrap of its clothing was pinned in the register along with this poem:

> Hard is my Lot in deep Distress
> To have no help where Most should find
> Sure Nature meant her several Laws
> Should men as strong as Women bind
> Regardless he, Unable I
> To keep this Image of my Heart
> 'Tis Vile to Murder! Hard to Starve
> And Death almost to me to Part
> If Fortune should her Favours give
> That I in better Plight may Live
> I'd try to have my Boy again
> And Train him up the best of Men.
>
> Joseph—in London. Born Apr 28.1759
> *Va! Mon Enfant prend ta Fortune*.[15]

As the unfortunate parents of these children reached for literary means to describe and shape their suffering, so too did literature influence the concept of the foundling from within the institution. On admission—whether an infant was deposited at the door, or brought by some woman who petitioned for her child's admission—each child was given a new name, his or her previous existence wiped out.

To begin with the children were named after the illustrious living. Not surprisingly, this began to cause problems. So the process settled on names drawn from the illustrious dead—Julius Caesar, Edward

[15] From the Foundling Hospital collection in the London Metropolitan Archives, and quoted in *The Foundling Museum Guidebook* (2004), p. 46.

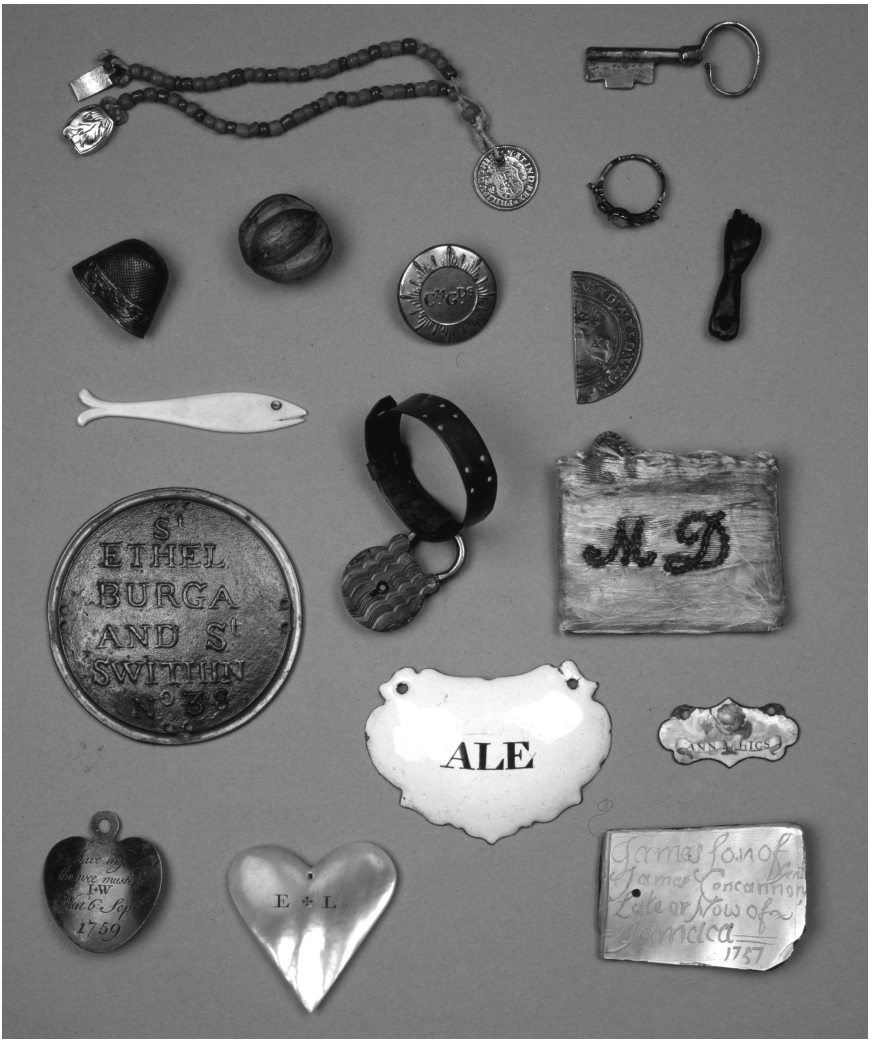

Figure 1. Tokens given by mothers to their children on leaving them at the Foundling Hospital (mixed media) by English School (18th century) (©The Foundling Museum, London, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library).

Plantagenet, Philip Sidney, Oliver Cromwell, Perkin Warbeck. Or they reflected aspirational or moral qualities—Diana Thrifty, Judith Bright, Alice Hope, Eliza Meek, Michael Angel. Otherwise the children were given geographical names, presumably alluding to their beginnings in life—Mary Islington, Thomas Africa, Frances Ladbrooke. Finally the children were given appropriate names drawn from legend and literature. Of these Moses was immensely popular, but so was Aaron, and there was

even an Ishmael and an Epaminondas. There was also a Clarissa Harlowe, a Sophia Western, a John Blifil, a George Allworthy, and—perhaps unsurprisingly—there were several named Tom Jones.

Songs of Innocence (and *Experience*)

By the latter part of the eighteenth century the idea of the lost and found, the abandoned child and the many charitable institutions that took them in, had become a familiar topic in literature. William Blake wrote several poems of Innocence and Experience about lost children, city children, and charity children. His first 'Holy Thursday' poem published in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) is about the special service held in St Paul's on the first Thursday in May for the children of London's charity schools:

> 'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
> The children walking two and two in red and blue and green,
> Grey-headed beadles walked before with wands as white as snow;
> Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames waters flow.

Blake's *Innocence* 'Holy Thursday' poem was illustrated with an image of the procession, but his other 'Holy Thursday' poem in *Songs of Experience* (1793) was altogether different. The text of the poem may not be explicit, but it hardly needs the very striking illustration of the stylised woman standing looking down on the body of the naked babe on the ground, to convey its own strange logic. It is not clear whether this woman in the illustration is the surprised finder or the stricken abandoner, and the poem itself allows for both:

> Is this a holy thing to see,
> In a rich and fruitful land;
> Babes reduced to misery,
> Fed with cold and usurous hand?
>
> Is that trembling cry a song?
> Can it be a song of joy?
> And so many children poor?
> It is a land of poverty!
>
> And their sun does never shine,
> And their fields are bleak and bare,
> And their ways are filled with thorns;
> It is eternal winter there.
>
> For where'er the sun does shine,
> And where'er the rain does fall—

Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appal.[16]

Half sheltered by a naked wall I

Many other poets wrote about children, or to and for children, in the late eighteenth century, but it was the abandoned baby, the orphaned child, the foundling, that came to put all the concepts of 'child' and 'childhood' most powerfully under pressure.

A small and naked child bears no marks of origin, and no identity. Displace that child from its points of origin and there is nothing to show the way back to those beginnings. The child has no language, no memory and no consciousness which will allow him to explain who he is. His body will bear no marks that link him to any other person or place. It is only that other person or place that can identify him, the 'naming' and recognition can only go in one direction. Only the developed consciousness—whether that of an adult or another child—can say 'he looks like his father', or recognise the baby's moles or birthmarks, or claim external markers like the child's clothing, or the kinds of tokens left with the babies of the Foundling Hospital. Recognition and identity is here an entirely one-way process. [17]

But at the same time that child must have a past beyond his beginning, on the other side of birth and the scene of relinquishment. The facts of biology mean that he must have had a father (however briefly) and a mother, a mother whose voice will be familiar to him and whose face he is quite likely to have seen, if only once. But the key idea is that the child is alone. Unaided, without support and without name or place in an alien world, the abandoned child must construe his own identity and shape his own landmarks.

[16] William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, (1789 and 1793), ed. Richard Willmot (Oxford, 1990), pp. 18 and 29–30. Josephine McDonagh notes that Blake's poem, combined with its engraving, 'encourages us to see the child's death as the responsibility of the "cold and usurous hand" of society more generally': *Child Murder and British Culture*, pp. 69–70.

[17] Nonetheless, the adults whose lives are marked by the experience of abandoned children (perhaps as parents driven to this extreme, or perhaps as adoptive parents pondering the 'mystery' of their child's origins) often seem driven to create, or to believe in, the possibility of the mark that will always distinguish their child. Internet websites for self-help support groups for adoptive parents often cite stories about abandoned babies bearing distinctive scars or marks on their bodies. It may only be an urban myth, but it still indicates the power of the drive for claiming an identity and knowledge of origin.

William Wordsworth wrote a poem about an abandoned baby in the story of Martha Ray in 'The Thorn', published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. But in a well-known passage from *The Prelude* he writes one of his best accounts of the abandoned child; yet it is, in fact, about himself. It is a passage that appears (only minimally revised) in all the versions of the poem from the two-part *Prelude* of 1805 to the last version of 1850. It also bears some relation to other sections on his early life in *The Prelude* and to many of the major poems such as 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Intimations of Immortality based on Recollections of Early Childhood'.

This is from Book One of the two-part *Prelude*, lines 330–53:

> One Christmas time,
> The day before the holidays began,
> Feverish, and tired, and restless, I went forth
> Into the fields, impatient for the sight
> Of those three horses which should bear us home,
> My brothers and myself. There was a crag,
> An eminence, which from the meeting point
> Of two highways ascending overlooked
> At least a long half-mile of those two roads,
> By each of which the expected steeds might come—
> The choice uncertain. Thither I repaired
> Up to the highest summit. 'Twas a day
> Stormy, and rough, and on the grass
> I sate half sheltered by a naked wall.
> Upon my right hand was a single sheep,
> A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there
> Those two companions at my side, I watched
> With eyes intensely straining, as the mist
> Gave intermitting prospects of the wood
> And plain beneath. Ere I to school returned
> That dreary time, ere I had been ten days
> A dweller in my father's house, he died,
> And I and my two brothers, orphans then,
> Followed his body to the grave.

This passage includes both the site and the sight of orphaning—of the certainty of knowing himself to be alone in the world, even though the orphaning has actually not yet happened, and he is, strictly speaking, not alone. Thus it is the feelings, the apprehension of isolation *in itself* that makes the significance of the moment, not the facts.

The poet-speaker is supposed to be going 'home' but—as far as poetic logic is concerned—he never makes it, for we never see the anticipated horsemen arrive. The poet looks out from a 'summit', a high point of vision then, and sees two roads which represent 'the choice uncertain'. In

the poetic landscape of the mind these might be roads leading both to the past and to the future. This is a day 'stormy' and 'rough' wherein he is exposed. At the centre are three apparently uncomplicated constituents of the scene which displace and 'carry across', which become metaphors representing the vulnerable self. Like many (literally) exposed babies he is 'half-sheltered' by a 'wall', while the close juxtaposition of the adjective 'naked' creates a slippage, so that the child is more easily visualised as 'naked' than the wall can ever be. The 'sheep' on his right hand is 'single', like the lost sheep sought by the good shepherd in Christ's parable. The 'whistling hawthorn' on his left is bare, and makes a sound without language, as the cry of the infant child. His eyes 'strain' to see the 'intermitting prospects' but far from being 'plain' he sees a dark wood only through a mist. From having been a 'dweller in my father's house'—with all the New Testament implications that go with the phrase—he finds himself an 'orphan' in the world.

The episode, he tells us immediately, stays in his mind, its elements slightly displaced again, reordered and 'translated', made into a nexus of metaphors once again as he repeats the scene which, he says, he will go on repeating compulsively:

> And afterwards the wind and sleety rain,
> And all the business of the elements,
> The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
> And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
> The noise of wood and water, and the mist
> Which on the line of each of those two roads
> Advanced in such indisputable shapes—
> All these were spectacles and sounds to which
> I often would repair, and thence would drink
> As at a fountain. And I do not doubt
> That in this later time, when storm and rain
> Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
> When I am in the woods, unknown to me
> The workings of my spirit thence are brought.[18]

But in this second refrain there is one fundamental change. The 'old stone wall' and the 'wood and water' make a 'noise', specifically a 'bleak music' and it is to these 'spectacles and sounds' to which he 'repairs'—with all the puns of restitution—and drinks 'As at a fountain'. Paradoxically, the moment of loss is the moment of most gain. The poet

[18] William Wordsworth, from the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, in Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (eds.), *The Prelude: 1799, 1895, 1850* (New York, 1979), pp. 9–11.

is lost in the world, he is orphaned. But in recognising, naming and recording in the displacing poetic language of metaphor and music, he finds himself.

Wordsworth's scene of self-discovery is one that was to go on to be highly influential in the vocabulary and images of his Victorian successors writing in both poetry and prose. Tennyson established himself as a major poet with the publication of *In Memoriam* (1850) where he re-visited the child's lonely moment of loss. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poet-heroine in *Aurora Leigh* (1857) discovers a sense of the conscious self at the moment when she loses her father. And the opening chapter of Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861–2) puts the scene of Pip's recognition of 'the identity of things' beside the grave of his father and mother.[19]

Of course the nineteenth century is full of orphan heroes and heroines and this is usually seen as a trope for the young person—or any person—negotiating an entry into society. But to know that you are alone, to understand the concept, let alone to 'name' yourself and go on to create an identity, requires language, and this is where poetry—and particularly the poetry of the nursery—comes into play.

Half sheltered by a naked wall II

The earliest children's books recognised the importance of poetry. In his Preface to the *Divine Songs* addressed 'to all that are concerned in the Education of Children', Isaac Watts gave four reasons for instruction through poetry: because there is 'great delight in the easy learning of Truths and Duties this way' due to Rhyme and Metre being 'so amusing and entertaining'; because 'What is learned in Verse is longer retained in Memory and soon recollected'; because children will thus 'have something to think upon when alone, and sing over to themselves'; and

[19] 'So runs my dream: but what am I? | An infant crying in the night: an infant crying for the light: And with no language but a cry.', Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850), canto LIV, in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson* (London and Harlow, 1969), p. 909. 'I was just thirteen, | Still growing like the plants from unseen roots | In tongue-tied Springs,—and suddenly awoke | To full life and life's needs and agonies | With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside | A stone-dead father . . .', Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York, 1996), p. 11. 'My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried', Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations,* with an introduction by David Trotter and edited with notes by Charlotte Mitchell (1860–1: London, 2003), p. 3.

because such songs provide 'pleasant and proper Matter for their daily or weekly Worship, to sing over in the Family, or at such times as the Parents or Governors shall appoint'.[20]

Over a hundred years later Lucy Aikin made much the same point in her 1825 *Poetry for Children, Consisting of Short Pieces to be Committed to Memory*:

> The magic of rhyme is felt in the very cradle—the mother and the nurse employ it as a spell of soothing power. The taste for harmony, the poetical ear, if ever acquired, is so almost during infancy. The flow of numbers easily impresses itself on the memory and is with difficulty erased. By the aid of verse a store of beautiful imagery and glowing sentiment may be gathered up as the amusement of childhood, which, in ripe years may sooth the weary hours of languor, solitude and sorrow; may strengthen feelings of piety, humanity and tenderness; may sooth the soul to calmness, rouse it to honourable exertion, or fire it with virtuous indignation.[21]

In each case, while the fact of poetry's being easy to recall is emphasised, it is interesting that both these writers see poetry as contributing to the formation of the child's identity and character. It is also interesting to note that they both construe poetry as a private resource, something they may 'sing over to themselves' or turn to in 'solitude', much as Wordsworth turns his 'inward eye' in 'the bliss of solitude' to the scenes—above Tintern Abbey, along the daffodil-strewn shores of Lake Esthwaite, or on that hill overlooking the two roads—that made him as a poet and that he made into poetry.

Lucy Aikin's remark about mothers and nurses, and 'the magic of rhyme' being felt 'in the very cradle' raises another issue. As parents will know, rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, repetition, metaphor, and poetic shape are very often the first kinds of speech directly offered to the new-born baby; except that it comes out as 'And who's my darlingist most delishingest itty bitty honey bunny baby then?' Rocking your baby according to the poetry of your own intimate body rhythms—and almost everybody's is slightly different—poetry is what you offer to the child; except that this comes out as

> Eleanor, Eleanor,
> Dropped the baby on the floor

[20] Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (London, 1835), pp. i-iv.
[21] Lucy Aikin, *Poetry for Children: Consisting of Short Pieces to be Committed to Memory* (London, 1825), p. iv.

> Knocked her brains out with a smack,
> Mopped them up and put them back.

Or else,

> Whose Daddy put her in the microwave
> In the microwave
> In the microwave?
> Whose Daddy . . .[22]

and so on for several verses.

While vocabulary and cognitive activities and knowledge, such as numerical calculations, belong to the left, or dominant, cerebral hemisphere, poetry—distinguished by its free associating displacements and illogical connections—is an activity belonging to the right, or non-dominant, cerebral hemisphere. Of course it also needs the attributes of the dominant hemisphere to bring it into being, but its musical and emotional qualities are similarly associated with the non-dominant right hemisphere. In new-borns, the right hemisphere is larger than the left and this remains the case until the third or fourth year.

In a fascinating account of lullabies, and their functions in relation to what psychologists call 'Motherese', or 'BT' (Baby Talk), Marina Warner explains why mothers hold and cradle babies on their left side. It used be thought that it was to do with the mother's heartbeat, but new work suggests that it is to do with the child's accessing and learning language—and the world—through the associative processes of the right brain, which are of course connected to the left side of the body. So the child cradled with its right side against the mother's left breast has his left ear and eye free to experience vocal and visual stimulus, all the web of associations, emotions and reactions that make up the infant's learning of the world which is 'independent of verbal meaning'.[23]

The Australian psychologist and poet Craig Powell takes this further. In an article entitled 'On Poetry and Weeping' he suggests that the very moment of the acquisition of language is a moment of loss. As the developing child begins to understand that he and his mother are not one, but different—a process learned through the sound of the mother's voice, as he begins to distinguish the specificity of the noises which he makes from the sounds made by her, so he experiences loss,

[22] I am indebted to Paul and Vicky, Eleanor Shearer's father and mother, for their inventions.
[23] Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, pp. 232–3.

and mourns the separation where the security of one becomes two.[24] The realisation that comes to the child as he recognises that the mother is no longer a 'self-object' but distinctively other, is one that comes with language and with naming. The child names his mother. And at that very point he loses her. He is orphaned. Now this does work very neatly where children do indeed utter 'Mama' as their first word. Even 'Dada' fits the theory. But I am left wondering what to do with the children whose first words are 'cat', or 'ball' or 'book', which was the case with my nephew and nieces, let alone the child whose first word was 'hoover'.

Still the point remains. Entry into language is always a site of mourning, and specifically mourning for the imaginary mother (whether that child has an actual mother present at the time or not). So poetry—the most associative, displacing, transmuting language form—will always recall that essential moment of childish loss. A loss which in fact, biologically speaking, begins even further back with parturition when the child is no longer part of two, self and other, surrounded by and part of the mother's body, blood, heartbeat. In poetry then, we are all foundlings—separate, displaced and alone. But what we might find there is everything—and ourselves.

Different and yet the same

I keep saying 'the child', as if there were only one. Or as if children were all the same. In fact, of course, the only thing that all children share is what we all share by virtue of being alive, and which, in turn makes us all feel that we are qualified to know what 'children' are—the fact that we have all been one.

This conviction of certainty took the nineteenth-century idea of the child on to some peculiar consequences. 'The child' was supposed to be living in a land of 'childhood' which was different, special, pure maybe, certainly a blank page. It might be tinged with sadness at both ends—because of the first loss which comes with birth and separation, and the second loss which comes at the entry into grown-up life, but it is definitely alienated from the adult world, strange and separate, not at home in

[24] Craig Powell, 'On Poetry and Weeping' in *Free Associations*, 3, part 2, no. 26 (1992), 185–8. See also Craig Powell, 'Poetry on the Brain' in *Meanjin: New Writing in Australia on Psychology*, 63, no. 4 (2004), 116–21.

the world of commerce, politics, work, social engagement and sexual relations.

But think back to the tokens left with the babies of the Foundling Hospital. The parents of those children tried desperately to give them an individual identity and to leave some trace of their child in the world. Or, to put it the other way round, to leave a trace of their world with the child. But the Foundling Hospital locked away those tokens. They dressed the children alike in a uniform. They trained them for the same jobs—girls for service, boys for the military—and they gave the children new names, which was often the same name, because it was just a different way of saying the same thing—'this is an orphan': Moses Thames, Philip Sidney, Hope Thrifty, Mercy Angel, Tom Jones.

Because the Foundling Hospital was dealing with children *en masse* they could turn them all into identikits of 'the child'. But funnily enough, that is exactly what was going on out in the world too, most especially in middle-class homes. Here too, children were dressed alike in a special 'uniform' that was ungendered and said 'this is a child'. They were relegated to their own special world, the nursery and the schoolroom, to be dealt with by specialist nurses and tutors, they were given the same specially produced books and poems to read. And writers began to write for that special, but generalised, audience. Everyone knows the story of how Lewis Carroll began to tell stories for one little girl called Alice, or how Edward Lear entertained his employer's children, or how Robert Browning composed 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' for Macready's little boy when he was ill. But so orthodox by now was the idea of the universality of 'the child' that publishers knew that there was profit to be made when you have two audiences—children themselves, and more importantly still, the masses of adults with ready money and a vested interest in preserving their idea of 'childhood' in 'the child'.

II. Lostlings

Exiled from childhood

But what then of the Lostlings? The children who are displaced from where they belong, but who are never found, and who yet remain as a memory, a shadow, an empty place, or a ghost. What then of the children who never did live in 'childhood'? After all, in the nineteenth century the

idealised sexless, ageless, fairy world of 'the child' was not where most children lived.

In 1842 the Children's Employment Commission investigating the working conditions for mines delivered its report. Illustrated with engravings, one of the pictures that caused most reaction showed two children—a boy and a girl, but on the verge of puberty—being drawn up out of a mine on a rope together, their legs wrapped around each other. The children are clearly naked from the waist up, and modern commentators say that even the breeches worn by the children in this picture were drawn in at a late stage before publication.[25] The report caused a lot of comment. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem about it. It caused a lot more comment than had been occasioned three years earlier when a 9-year-old boy was hanged at Chelmsford for arson. To my knowledge, no one wrote a poem about that.

By the 1850s sensationalist reports on prostitution calculated the numbers of children sold or selling themselves on the street in thousands. Child beggars, some deliberately mutilated, were often to be seen by tourists in Italy but they were common in England too. In 1856 there were 1,990 children under the age of 12 in prison. Burial societies paid out on insurance, no questions asked, for dead children. Baby farms grew up that would take unwanted children off your hands and, it has to be said, pretty shortly off their own. The press was full of stories of mysterious houses in the suburbs where heavily pregnant women went in, stayed for a while, only to come out slim and with no baby. In the late 1850s and into the 1860s there was another epidemic of abandoned babies both dead and alive, in ponds, in privies, but also this time, typically, in railway carriages, in canals and by roadsides.[26]

Adult literature dealt with all of this, but books for children—by definition a middle-class production designed for a middle-class audience—

[25] *Children's Employment Commission (Trades and Manufactures)*, Parliamentary Papers, 1843, Volume XIV, Appendix to 2nd report, pt. I, Appendix. III, Cols. 6–7. See Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750–1870,* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 99–101.

[26] See George Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870–1908* (Stanford, 1982), pp. 17, 20–1, 27–8 and McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture* pp. 101–14, 123–7. McDonagh quotes Henry Humble's 'Infanticide, Its Cause and Cure' from Revd Orby Shipley (ed.), *The Church and the World: Essays on Questions of the Day* (1866), p. 57: '. . . bundles are left lying about the streets, which people will not touch, lest the too familiar object—a dead body—should be revealed, perchance with a pitch plaster over its mouth, or a woman's garter around its throat. Thus, too, the metropolitan canal boats are impeded, as they are tracked along by the number of drowned infants with which they come into contact, and the land is becoming defiled by the blood of her innocents.'

became very schizophrenic. Even an apparently innocuous book of poems by 'safe' women writers like Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell and Dinah Mulock, published in 1865 and guaranteed by its title of *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*, carried illustrations by Arthur Boyd Houghton that displaced and unsettled, that even contradicted the poems.[27] The children are shown 'in nature'—much as Wordsworth depicted himself in nature, with that 'single sheep' and the 'blasted tree' in *The Prelude*—because of the prevailing idea of the childlike as 'natural' and 'innocent'. But the children look lost, alienated, and afraid and the adults are shown turning away, taking no notice, or asleep.

The Infant Life Protection Act

At the end of December 1872 Christina Rossetti published *Sing-Song*, subtitled *A Nursery Rhyme Book* and with a hundred-and-twenty illustrations by Arthur Hughes.[28]

Ten years earlier in 1862 Rossetti had had no intention of writing for children. In a letter dated 7 March [1862] to a correspondent not identified in Anthony H. Harrison's scholarly edition of her letters, she wrote:

> My dear Sir,
>
> I should be very happy for something of mine to come out in a volume so ably illustrated and containing contributions by Miss Greenwell and Miss Ingelow; but it so happens that children are not amongst my suggestive subjects and I could not venture to promise you anything at all worthy of such plates.[29]

Rossetti's correspondent was clearly George Routledge, the publisher of *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*, and it would also seem from this letter that some—if not all—of the poems were written to the engravings and

[27] *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* : Original poems by Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, Mrs Tom Taylor, the Hon. Mrs Norton, Amelia B. Edwards, Jennett Humphreys, and the author of 'John Halifax, Gentleman' [Dinah Mulock Craik], illustrated by Arthur Boyd Houghton (London, 1865). See also Christine Sutphin, 'Victorian Childhood. Reading Beyond the 'Innocent Title': *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* in Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *New Approaches to Children's Literature*, pp. 51–77.

[28] Christina Rossetti, *Sing-Song. A Nursery Rhyme Book* with 120 illustrations by Arthur Hughes (London, 1872).

[29] *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, ed. Antony H. Harrison (Charlottesville and London), I (1997), pp. 158–9.

not the other way around.[30] But that leaves one important question. What happened to make Rossetti change her mind about writing for children?

In 1872, the same year as the publication of *Sing-Song*, the Infant Life Protection Act was passed. It set up the first legal requirement for the registration of the births—and the deaths—of infants; it provided for the regulation of houses used for lying-in; and it required the registration and regulation of nurses caring for two or more children under the age of one year. Among the groups which had pressed for this legislation was the Association for the Preservation of Infant Life established in 1862, the very year in which Rossetti refused to contribute to *Home Thoughts*. To begin with, the Association's campaigning in Parliament and in the press was directed at reform of the 1844 Poor Law Amendment, arguing that if the stigma of illegitimate birth fell equally upon father as upon mother, it might help to prevent the high incidence of infanticide. In 1863 the Association had gone on to establish the National Society and Asylum for the Prevention of Infanticide with a view to offering practical help to mothers. But by the time Parliament actually took up the cause, it had become clear that it was not just mothers (or fathers) but complete strangers, that were also disposing of infants—for a fee: hence the terms eventually enshrined in the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act.

In his book on *Child Abuse and Moral Reform* George Behlmer says that the Act was not very successful in implementation.[31] But the publicity devoted to the problem of unnatural infant death—and the problem of mistreated children generally—had been so much canvassed in public that it did have results. Political and reforming results, as I will explain, but also literary results. Arthur Hughes's Frontispiece illustration to Rossetti's *Sing-Song* repairs Wordsworth's site of orphaning (Fig. 2). Here there are lots of sheep and a burgeoning tree sheltering guardian angels. Above all, the image supplies the lost mother, who is here (literally) knitting all the displacements back together (though she is also holding the baby on her right, rather than her left side). Rossetti's text, on the other hand, is not as innocent as it looks. Her work never is.

[30] Christine Sutphin comments on a certain 'disjunction' between the sinister character of the engravings in *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* and the relatively more sentimental tone of the poems, but this may be explained by the fact that the engravings seem to have come first: see Christine Sutphin, 'Victorian Childhood. Reading Beyond the "Innocent Title": *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*' in Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *New Approaches to Children's Literature*, pp. 51–77.

[31] See Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England*, p. 38.

Figure 2. Arthur Hughes's frontispiece illustration to Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song*.

Sing-Song

While Rossetti was working on her collection of 'nursery rhymes' she was very particular about the ordering of the poems, and about the illustrations which she envisaged as essential to the whole. In the manuscript, now in the British Library, she included little instructive sketches in pencil and red crayon for each of the poems, even while claiming that 'I cannot draw'.[32] As the manuscript did the rounds of publishers, she made it clear that her own sketches were not to be included, but were designed to 'explain my meaning' to whichever artist would eventually undertake the commission.

The settling on a choice of artist proved to be a problem. At one stage the work was offered to Rossetti's friend Alice Boyd, but then Rossetti did not like the sketches Boyd submitted. Eventually, William Michael Rossetti suggested Arthur Hughes. The key point of all this is that the illustrations—as eventually produced by Hughes—are very much an integral part of the book.[33] The title of the collection itself, while it looks simple enough, sets up some of the key concepts and patterns in the book: it is paradoxical, oppositional, punning, riddling and tautological. If there is singing, then there is a song. If there is a song, then there is singing. If there is an up—as in a 'sing-song' voice—then there is a down. The whole collection is arranged around this set of oppositions, or displacements. This is the first poem in the collection and Hughes's accompanying illustration shows a baby in a cradle watched over by one adult angel and two winged cherubs (Fig. 3).

> Angels at the foot,
> And Angels at the head,
> And like a curly little lamb
> My pretty babe in bed.

If one reads the whole collection as a self-contained narrative poem, then it completes a circle or a round. The volume begins and ends with a

[32] The autograph manuscript is in the British Library, Ashley. 1371.

[33] *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*: Christina Rossetti to Frederick Startridge Ellis, 23 Feb. 1870 (I, 341); Christina Rossetti to Ellis, 25 Feb. 1870 (I, 342); Christina Rossetti to the Dalziel Brothers, 26 April 1871 (I, 369–71); Christina Rossetti to the Dalziel Brothers, 3 Aug. 1871 (I, 375); Christina Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 1 Sept. 1871 (I, 379–80); the Dalziel Brothers to Christina Rossetti, 1 Sept. 1871 (I, 381); Christina Rossetti to the Dalziel Brothers, [21 Sept. 1871] (I, 382); Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 20 [Nov. 1871], and Christina Rossetti to the Dalziel Brothers, [25 Nov. 1871], (I, 385–6); Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, [1 Dec. 1871], (I, 387).

Figure 3.

cradle—actually the same illustrated cradle that reappears several times in the volume, as does its little carved heart design, which figures at one point hung over mother's bed, and, in another illustration, carved on a baby's grave. The illustrations to the first and last poems in the collection make a kind of mirror image. The adult angel in the illustration to the opening poem kneels on the right-hand side of the cradle. The adult woman in the illustration to the final poem in the volume is positioned on the left-hand side of the cradle. The angel and the mother here make a pair of 'book ends' to the whole collection, and this visual image reflects a similar 'mirroring' in the text: in the first poem baby is 'like a curly little lamb'; in the last poem baby is 'bo-peep'.

The second poem emphasises the mother/child dyad by setting up mirrors that guarantee reciprocity. Love goes back and forth, the song is both high and low, mother's arms are under and her eyes are above.

> Love me,—I love you,
> Love me, my baby:
> Sing it high, sing it low,
> Sing it as may be.
>
> Mother's arms under you,
> Her eyes above you
> Sing it high, sing it low,
> Love me,—I love you.

Then the tone changes; the third poem in the collection presents at one and the same time, the certainty of security on the inside, and the

place outside or beyond, where there is the risk of the motherless, the fatherless, the forlorn and the poor. Arthur Hughes's image is similarly ambiguous and double (Fig. 4). Is this simply a mother lying asleep as her baby tugs at her dress? Or does her couch resemble a marble slab, making this a monument to the dead? Whichever way you look at it—and both possibilities are there—the adult turns her head away, as the adults so often do in Arthur Boyd Houghton's illustrations to *Home Thoughts.*

My baby has a father and a mother,
Rich little baby!
Fatherless, motherless, I know another
Forlorn as may be:
Poor little baby!

By poem 4—which offers the other side of Poem 3—the link is explicit.

Our little baby fell asleep.
And may not wake again,
For days and days, and weeks and weeks;
But then he'll wake again,
And come with his own pretty look
And kiss Mamma again.

Now the baby is the one lost, and in Hughes's illustration (Fig. 5) the child is carried away by the adult angel we have already seen illustrating the first poem. The angel is represented horizontally (like the mother in the illustration to Poem 3) but, conversely and importantly, she is looking directly at the child in her arms.

After the four prefatory poems the 'story' of the collection marks out its true beginning at Poem 5 with daybreak 'springing':

Figure 4.

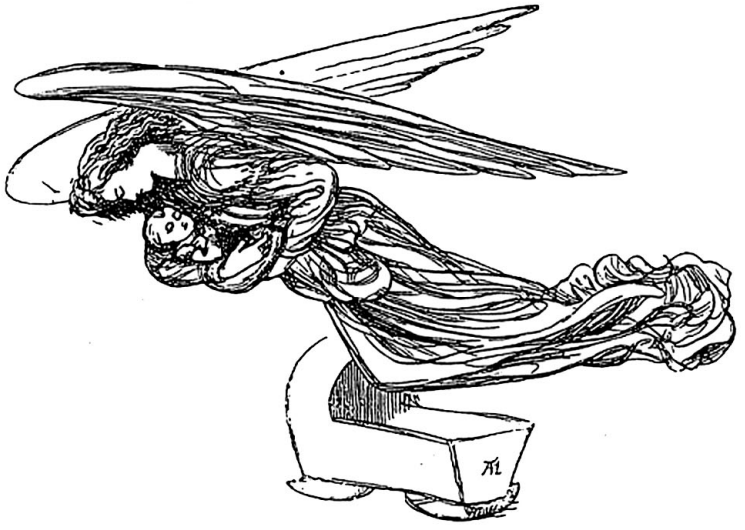

Figure 5.

'Kookoorookoo! kookoorookoo!'
  Crows the cock before the morn;
'Kikirikee! kikirikee!'
  Roses in the east are born.

'Kookoorookoo! kookoorookoo!'
  Early birds begin their singing;
'Kikirikee! kikirikee!'
  The day, the day, the day is springing.

Essentially the whole of *Sing-Song* contains only three kinds of poems. Firstly, there are broadly defined 'nature' poems, like this one, that emphasise the positioning of the 'innocent' child in the natural world and that follow on from Rousseau and Wordsworth.

Secondly, there are the liminal 'inside/outside' poems, like 'Bread and milk for breakfast', which is helpfully illustrated with an actual window out of which the child leans:

Bread and milk for breakfast,
  And woollen frocks to wear,
And a crumb for robin redbreast
  On the cold days of the year.

Similarly, in 'There's snow on the fields', Rossetti repeatedly sets the warmth, consistency and security of home against the cold, the contingency and the risk of 'beyond home';

There's snow on the fields,
And cold in the cottage,
While I sit in the chimney nook
Supping hot pottage.

My clothes are soft and warm,
Fold upon fold,
But I'm so sorry for the poor
Out in the cold.

Then, thirdly, there are the utterly typical Rossetti poems that riddle.

A city plum is not a plum;
A dumb-bell is no bell, though dumb;
A statesman's rat is not a rat;
A sailor's cat is not a cat;
A soldier's frog is not a frog;
A captain's log is not a log.

These 'riddling' kinds of poems represent, repeat and reinforce—at a very sophisticated level—the key moment when the child enters into language. As the child says 'Mama' and identifies 'Mama' as 'other' and not part of himself—realises that they are two and not one—so here the poem is structured around the dualistic character of language, of the word or sign as separated from the thing, idea or object that that word or sign represents.

These riddle poems are also, of course, about poetic language and the duality of metaphor and poetic method. But I wonder too whether Rossetti's riddle poems also have a more practical and worldly side. 'A city plum is not a plum' may be a whimsical tease, but it is also about finance, sport, politics, the military and commerce. It may be that within the sequence of poems in *Sing-Song* there is not just a simple 'inside/outside' concerned with houses, and with worldly power and possessions (and the lack thereof), but also a complicated 'inside/outside' concerned with the meta-text of the 'masculine' worlds of social engagement, as opposed to the 'feminine' world of family and home. It may be too that the lesson of ambivalence and doubleness that underlies so many of Rossetti's poems in this collection is all the more necessary in learning how to negotiate that grown-up 'masculine' world where things are quite likely *not* to be what they seem.

As the collection goes on, Rossetti's poems insist on mourning, risk and loss. 'A baby's cradle with no baby in it' is illustrated with the empty cradle and the mourning mother:

A baby's cradle with no baby in it,
  A baby's grave where autumn leaves drop sere;
The sweet soul gathered home to Paradise,
  The body waiting here.

'Crying, my little one' is illustrated with the mother cradling the child on her shoulder and trudging through the snow:

Crying, my little one, footsore and weary?
  Fall asleep, pretty one, warm on my shoulder:
I must tramp on through the winter night dreary,
  While the snow falls on me colder and colder.

You are my one, and I have not another;
  Sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure;
Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother,
  Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure.

The poems insist too on inside and outside, security and danger, and they play with the failures of language and explanation. In 'Why did baby die', the same sound rhyme is repeated throughout, linking all the words to do with the voice—'sigh', 'cry' and 'no reply'—with the definitive 'die' and the eternally repeated question 'why?' It looks astonishingly simple. It is remarkably complex.

Why did baby die,
Making Father sigh,
Mother cry?

Flowers, that bloom to die,
Make no reply
Of 'why?'
But bow and die.

Finally, the collection reiterates the necessities of contrast and measurement, and the contradictions and oppositions that make the only kind of sense:

If all were rain and never sun,
  No bow could span the hill;
If all were sun and never rain,
  There'd be no rainbow still.

And yet Rossetti takes that sensible key fact of life—that there can be no joy without sorrow, no life without death, no positive without a negative, and takes it to its necessary conclusion in depicting the everyday nonsense of language and the social contract:

If a pig wore a wig,
  What could we say?
Treat him as a gentleman,
  And say, 'Good day.'

If his tail chanced to fail,
  What could we do? –
Send him to the tailoress
  To get a new one.

Through the whole collection Rossetti emphasises the riddling language that exists in poetry, in the nursery and in the 'real' world:

A pin has a head, but no hair;
A clock has a face, but no mouth there;
Needles have eyes, but they cannot see;
A fly has a trunk without lock or key;
A timepiece may lose, but cannot win;
A corn-field dimples without a chin;
A hill has no leg, but has a foot;
A wine-glass a stem, but not a root;
A watch has hands, but no thumb or finger;
A boot has a tongue, but is no singer;
Rivers run, though they have no feet;
A saw has teeth, but it does not eat;
Ash-trees have keys, yet never a lock;
And baby crows, without being a cock.

The message in *Sing-Song* for children—or perhaps for adults *about* children—is that this is a world which cannot be trusted, where children are always vulnerable and at risk. At first sight Hughes's illustration to 'A pin has a head' seems peculiarly irrelevant—or else deceptively simple. It shows a mother chatting to the toddler she holds to her shoulder. But the two look down on a homemade broody box where a cat seems to be safely shut up away from the little chicks that peck around at mother's feet (Fig. 6).

And yet even in Rossetti's elaborate contradictions of risk and loss, inside and outside, there is the possibility of a poetic resolution.

Motherless baby and babyless mother,
Bring them together to love one another.

This poem is the shortest in the volume—perhaps the shortest in Rossetti's whole *oeuvre*—and yet it clearly demonstrates Rossetti's method and effect (Fig. 7). Like the collection as a whole, it is a kind of palindrome, because it reads the same backwards and forwards. Like the

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

title of the collection, it is also tautological, for everything is repeated and mirrored. Even the vocabulary itself is repeated—two 'baby's in the first line, two 'mother's and two 'less's. In the second line 'them together' and 'one another' are repetitions, just as the two verbs 'bring' and 'love' are similar, both being about doubleness; you can only 'bring' something from one place to another, and can only 'love' something when there is a consciousness to do the loving and an object to be loved. The only slightly varied words in the whole poem are the conjunction 'and' in the first line, and the preposition 'to' in the second. But in terms of the poetic function of *Sing-Song* as a whole, even those two tiny words are relevant, for every poem—whether a safety and loss poem, or an inside and outside poem, or a riddling poem—is about 'and', about additions and connections; there is one thing and there is another. Every poem in the collection has a 'to' in the sense of 'in order to achieve', in order to bring about some purpose or meaning.

> Crimson curtains round my mother's bed,
> Silken soft as may be;
> Cool white curtains round about my bed,
> For I am but a baby.

The collection concludes with a series of poems that head us off to bed and back towards the baby in the cradle. Superficially they look like soothing evening poems closing the 'day' or the seasons of childhood. But look more closely, and they are about transition and change, about the difference between 'baby' and 'mother'—about growing up then.

Rossetti thumbs back through poems about the lost child:

> Baby lies so fast asleep
> That we cannot wake her:
> Will the Angels clad in white
> Fly from heaven to take her?

> Baby lies so fast asleep
> That no pain can grieve her;
> Put a snowdrop in her hand,
> Kiss her once and leave her.

She intersperses them with cheerful poems about the 'found' child:

> I know a baby, such a baby,—
> Round blue eyes and cheeks of pink,
> Such an elbow furrowed with dimples,
> Such a wrist where creases sink.

'Cuddle and love me, cuddle and love me'
  Crows the mouth of coral pink:
Oh, the bald head, and, oh, the sweet lips,
  And, oh, the sleepy eyes that wink!

She runs again through the nursery songs, the comfort of mother's voice, through the processes of learning the world through the associative right brain, and the dichotomies of inside and outside. Here, in the illustration to 'Lullaby, oh, lullaby!' baby is being held the right way round:

Lullaby, oh, lullaby!
Flowers are closed and lambs are sleeping;
Lullaby, oh, lullaby!
Stars are up, the moon is peeping;
Lullaby, oh, lullaby!
While the birds are silence keeping,
Lullaby, oh, lullaby!
Sleep, my baby, fall a-sleeping,
Lullaby, oh, lullaby!

And so to the final poem in the collection which is clearly about the sanctity of the cradle in the nursery, and the safety of home and mother's love:

Lie a-bed,
Sleepy head,
Shut up eyes, bo-peep;
Till daybreak
Never wake:—
Baby, sleep.

Or not.

For this mother—in Hughes's illustration (Fig. 8) to 'Lie a-bed'—kneels over her baby from the left, thus mirroring the angel who knelt over the baby from the right in the first poem in the collection 'Angels at the foot | And angels at the head'. More than that, only three poems back we read 'Baby lies so fast asleep | That we cannot wake her; | Will the Angels clad in white | Fly from heaven to take her?' As so often with Rossetti, words, once said, cannot be unsaid. The *sense* of this poem's ending—and so the ending to the whole collection—is indeed that baby should sleep only 'till daybreak'. But the *feeling* remains—once 'Never wake:—' has been uttered, that is all too probably what will happen.

Figure 8.

Nursery Rhymes? Home and the '*unheimlich*'

In 1865 John Ruskin in 'Of Queen's Gardens' had published one of his best-known pieces of propaganda about home and the family, and particularly about women's role. 'This', he wrote,

> is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of the outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in.[34]

However innocuous *Sing-Song* may appear to us now, the truth is that Rossetti does let in 'terror, doubt and division'. Over and again critics have described her most famous poems as 'uncanny', 'wayward', 'haunting', 'unsettling' and 'ambiguous', and the poems in *Sing-Song* are that, just as much as any of the others.[35] Like *Goblin Market*, 'Winter, My

[34] John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens', *Sesame and Lilies,* in *The Works of John Ruskin* (London, 1903–12), 18, 122.

[35] See, for instance, Angela Leighton in Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 353–7 and Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), pp. 118–63. See also Isobel Armstrong, 'Christina Rossetti: Diary of a Feminist Reading', in Sue Roe (ed.), *Women Reading Women's Writing* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 117–37 and Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 344–54.

Secret' or 'Remember', *Sing-Song* is a sequence that is haunted by repetitions, by silences, by mirrors and doubles, by animals that are human, and inanimate objects that live, by *déjà vu,* premature burial, by danger and risk, and by death. Above all, when read against the backdrop of contemporary events and reforms with respect to children, Rossetti does indeed let 'the anxieties of the outer life' and 'the hostile society of the outer world' enter into the sanctity of the home—and into the nursery.

But of course that is what poetry—including poetry for, to and about children—often does do. The texts of lullabies and nursery rhymes court and negotiate the threats that encompass the child, even while the mother's voice magically chants 'home', sings evil away out into the other side of this safe space with the reassurance of her presence.[36] Marina Warner quotes a piece of 'etymological guesswork' on the part of an eighteenth-century lexicographer who proposed that the very word 'lullaby' means 'to sleep (lull) at home' on the grounds that 'by' is derived from the old word for 'home' (as in 'Selby' or 'Grimsby').[37] But, as we have seen, even in the 'nursery' poems under discussion here, 'home' is a place always threatened by the hostile outside, as in the anxious poems about children in the city by Isaac Watts or William Blake. Or else 'home' is a place one never reaches, just as we never get to see the anticipated horsemen in *The Prelude* who were to come to take the young William Wordsworth back 'home' to be 'a dweller in my father's house'.

Home and its discontents

Christina Rossetti carried on with her new interest in children's literature—and in children. She went on to publish a collection of stories in *Speaking Likenesses* and she corresponded with other writers for children, like Lewis Carroll and Caroline Gemmer, who had once written under the name of 'Gerda Fay' and who published *Babyland, or, Pretty Rhymes for the Little Ones* in 1877. With Gemmer, Rossetti also shared a common interest in the welfare of animals and the efforts of the anti-

[36] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in '1837: Of the Refrain' in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1988: London and New York, 2004), p. 343.

[37] Warner *No Go the Bogeyman*, p. 204. The whole of Marina Warner's section on lullabies is important and instructive; as she says, 'Odd as it may seem, lullabies obsessively spell out such dangers, attempting to encompass every possibility', op. cit., p. 201. It should also be noted here that when Rossetti translated her *Sing-Song* into Italian she called it *Ninna-Nanna* which has the same alliteration and onomatopoeia as the English, but which also means 'lullaby' in Italian—the connection being to the mother, nurse or grandmother '*nan*' doing the singing.

vivisection campaigners. It is one of the ironies of the nineteenth century that even while the idealised image of 'the child' was at its most prevalent, actual children in the real world were the last vulnerable group to benefit from reform and legislation. They came after factory workers, after women, after animals.

Rossetti herself worked on behalf of all of these vulnerable groups. Though she declined, when asked in 1888, to become Patron of the Society for the Protection of Women and Children, earlier in the decade she had assiduously collected signatures for a petition in support of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill. One of the many important reforms supported by Josephine Butler, this Bill was introduced into Parliament in May 1883 and proposed the introduction of significant prison sentences for the seduction of girls under sixteen. It was eventually passed in 1885, but it attracted a lot of public comment in the process, and it was not the only reforming project concerned with the welfare of children in the 1880s.

In 1873, the year after the publication of *Sing-Song*, Benjamin Waugh published a controversial book entitled *The Gaol Cradle: Who Rocks it?*[38] Here he argued that sending juveniles to prison only turned them into hardened criminals and fostered the generations of adults filling up Britain's prisons. Waugh was later to become a leading figure in the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children which was established in 1884 on the model of a similar society set up in Liverpool in the previous year. Something happened to the ways in which society thought about children in the two decades from 1870. In France, substantial changes were made to the Napoleonic code which reduced the significance of the *puissance paternelle*, and this innovation seems to have filtered across the Channel. On the one hand, the idealisation of 'the child' in middle-class homes had turned children into a generic entity without individuality. At the same time that very difference had deprived poorer class children of their very humanity; they were construed as animals, chattels, objects.

Christina Rossetti, along with other important writers for children, blurred the boundaries and challenged the false categories. She did not

[38] For Benjamin Waugh see ch. 2, 'Benjamin Waugh and the Founding of the Society' in Anne Allen and Arthur Morton, *This is Your Child: The Story of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children* (London, 1961), pp. 15–33. Hesba Stretton was another writer who was interested in the work of the Society: op. cit., pp. 18–19. The first line of Allen and Morton's book is 'This book deals with terrible things'.

subscribe to the idealisation of 'the child', or see a separation between the adult world and the world of the child. She let the 'hostile society of the outer world' into her poetry for children, and wrote poetry for adults which was apparently about children, but which really dealt with the grown up subjects of sexual violence and sexual commerce. (Her best known work in this area is the poem *Goblin Market*, where even Dante Gabriel's opening illustration, showing a fully grown up Lizzie and Laura asleep in each others' arms, suggests the ambivalences of Christina Rossetti's poem.)

In the second half of the nineteenth century reformers, and then legislators, began to realise just how besieged real children were, how many lostlings had been cast aside, neglected, abused, murdered. An early history of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty for Children is illustrated with harrowing photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that testify to this new concern. The captions alone make the point: 'Starvation was common in the early days', 'Victims of brutality', 'Children lived in these places', 'Four neglected babies'. One picture of four terrified and haunted-looking children was labelled: 'Their home had *One* chair, *One* cup; They took turns to drink from a jam jar. Their Kitchen floor was slippery with dirt; Their parents were gaoled for six months for *Neglect.*'[39]

Between 1870 and 1908 no less than sixty-nine Acts of Parliament were passed concerning child-welfare. They dealt with everything ranging from elementary education to chimney sweepers, from the sale of drink and gunpowder to minors, to the punishment of incest and indecent assault, from consent to sex and the prevention of cruelty, to legislating on pawning and betting by infants.[40] If the 'hostile society of the outer world' had just begun to recognise the dangers that surrounded children, the literature of the nursery—in the very inner sanctum of home—had always known it.

[39] Allen and Morton, *This is Your Child*, pp. 6, 38, 39, 55, and 57.

[40] See Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England*, Appendix A, 'Child Welfare Legislation 1870–1908', pp. 229–30.

III. Changelings

Displacements and Daddies

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, and partly because of the efforts of reformers and legislators, children once again became more visible in the imagination of society. But shortly thereafter—just as had been the case in the mid-eighteenth century—the results of particular social and political events meant that more children were actually on the streets, and not in the nursery. So in order to get on to Changelings and my last kind of displaced child, here is an entirely unscientific sample of music hall songs dating from 1883 through to 1916, selected solely on the grounds that they each have the word 'Daddy' in the title.

The first is 'Daddy Long Legs', dating from 1883, where the singer explains how he was brought up as the 'school goody goody' until the 'fates made a slight alteration' when he met a girl in the street:

> Her eyes and her—well, altogether,
> I felt as I'd not felt before . . .
> . . . After tea I said 'I'll see you home'. She said 'Halfway'. I said 'All the way,
> I'm jiggered if I don't'. When to my surprise she said,
> [—and chorus –]
> 'Old Daddy Long Legs wouldn't say his prayers . . .'

As the verses go on, we meet the girl's brother and then another child, and eventually it becomes clear that these are the lostlings, and that 'Daddy Long Legs' is the spider who is all too willing to pay for their services.

'Goodbye Daddy' and 'The Boers have got my Daddy', both published in 1900, are self evidently sentimental songs designed to shore up public morale. But 'Don't be Angry Daddy' from 1901 offers a slightly different moral perspective, for this tells the story of a man who has deserted his family and who is subsequently haunted by the pleas of his child. 'Daddy, don't leave us dear' from 1902 tells a similar tale.

On the other hand, in 'Where Does Daddy Go, When He Goes Out' from 1913 we gradually realise all that is really going on, as the child tries to comfort his mother by explaining that he knows the answer to this question because he had heard father say 'I'll meet my fairy fine or wet'. The comic song 'When Daddy Comes Home Tonight' might be the sequel to the above, as the child begs mother not to 'black his eye tonight . . . as you did the other day'. 'Put Me Through To Daddy Christmas', from 1917, tells of a little girl making a phone call:

Put me through to Father Christmas
Hello Santy is that you?
I don't want my dolls and toys
Take my share to other girls and boys
All I want is just my Daddy
Who is fighting o'er the sea
Won't you drive, right away, in your sleigh, to the fray
And bring him back to me.

Finally, from 1916, 'The Empire Now Will Be Your Daddy'—which does not need any explanation.[41]

It may be unscientific, but it is revealing. From the recognition in popular culture of the moral threat that exercised so many of the reformers of the late nineteenth century, through a sentimental valuing of the family—even while it reflects the facts of fathers' desertions—to a kind of anti-Suffragette joke about strong-minded women, and the recognition that war means many fatherless children, this is a social history in little.

I set myself this exercise in the first place because I was posing a question about fathers at the turn of the century. As mentioned earlier, legislation in France had reduced the *puissance paternelle*, and in Britain too, legislation meant that actual fathers of real children no longer owned them as chattels as had once been the case. Instead, in very many ways the state had taken over that individual role, had systematised responsibility, so that patriarchy—instead of being made up of individual acts and general social expectations—was encoded in the law and the apparatus of the state; 'The Empire Now Will Be Your Daddy'.

At the turn of the nineteenth century Freud had also vested the idea of 'the father' with a key importance—as indeed he had the idea of 'the child'. In some ways Freud's recognition of the incidence and importance

[41] 'Daddy Long Legs', written by A. Maynard and composed by W. G. Eaton (Howard and Co., London, 1883); 'Goodbye Daddy', written by Laura Barclay, composed by Lucy Everard and sung by Miss Vesta Victoria (Francis, Day and Hunter, London, 1900); 'The Boers Have Got My Daddy', by Mills and Castling, and sung by Tom Costello (Francis, Day and Hunter, London, 1900); 'Don't Be Angry Daddy' written by Carl Howard and composed by E. Joughmans and sung by Tom Costello (Francis, Day and Hunter, London, 1901); 'Daddy, Don't Leave Us Dear', written by Frederick Buxton, composed by Arthur Jules and sung by Mrs Frederick Buxton (1902); 'Where Does Daddy Go When He Goes Out?', written and composed by Frederick Gardner and Billy Williams, and sung by Billy Williams (Francis, Day and Hunter, London, 1913); 'When Daddy Comes Home Tonight', written, composed and sung by Robert Henry (Keith Prowse, London, n.d.); 'Put Me Through To Daddy Christmas', words by James Wilson, composed by Sidney Lennox (E. Osbourne and Co., London, 1917); 'The Empire Now Will Be Your Daddy', written by R. P. Weston, composed by Herman Darewski (Francis, Day and Hunter, London, 1916). All of these items are in the Sheet Music collection in the Bodleian Library.

of childhood trauma, no matter how flawed it may have been, grew directly out of the nineteenth-century idea of 'the child'. It was a kind of skewed version of the argument that made childhood separate, special, different and alien, even while it would go on to recognise how that experience bled into the life of the adult. That this took Freud on to think first about *fathers*—not mothers, not nurses, not siblings—is what marks him as a man of his time. In psychoanalytic theory the importance of mothers and mothering begins to come into view essentially with the work of later analysts, like Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and D. J. Winnicott. It is only with John Bowlby's theory of attachment developed—significantly—after the Second World War, in the light of his study of the mass evacuation of children from London that it showed its results. It is at that stage that bonding and attachment, based on the model and the role of the mother, comes into clinical discourse.[42] But again, in literature, and even in legislation, the importance of the idea of the mother, or the mother substitute, had been there all along.

Adoption law and the welfare of the child

By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century there were a lot of displaced children in Britain. There were several reasons for this. One—bizarrely, but obviously—was the result of the Factory Acts which regulated the child labour market. In 1851 children under 15 had made up 6.9 per cent of the total workforce, but by 1881 they represented only 4.5 per cent.[43] No longer useful to parents as producers of labour, many children were left to their own devices. John Barnardo had set up his first institution for homeless children in the East End of London in 1866. By 1885 he had nine such establishments, but there were still reckoned to be some 20,000 homeless children living in London.[44] The Boer War, the First World War and the post-war influenza epidemic exacerbated the situation.

Officially, institutional care was the only option, partly because the old nineteenth-century practice of 'baby farming' had given private

[42] John Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (World Health Organisation, Monograph Series No. 2. 1951), and John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. I, *Attachment* (London, 1969), 2nd edn. (1982); vol. II, *Separation: Anger and Anxiety* (London, 1973); vol. III, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (London, 1980). See also Jeremy Holmes, *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory* (London, 1993), *passim*.
[43] Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870–1908*, p. 46.
[44] Ibid., p. 58.

adoption a bad name. This is one advertisement that had appeared over many weeks during 1870 in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*:

> Adoption—a good home with a mother's love and care is offered to any respectable person wishing her child to be entirely adopted. Premium £5 which sum includes everything. Apply by letter only to Mrs Oliver, Post Office, Grove-Place, Brixton.

On 12 June 1870 two dead babies were found in Brixton, one by a railway line, another in a pile of rubbish. In the previous weeks there had been sixteen other such finds in and around Brixton. The police investigation uncovered a scrap of paper with one of the dead babies that led to a particular house run by a Margaret Waters, who also went under the name of 'Oliver'. Waters was hanged for child murder on 11 October 1870.[45]

Nevertheless—given pressing contingent circumstances—in the early twentieth century private adoption was increasingly common, and promoted by several agencies such as the National Child Adoption Association. In 1920 Edward Shortt, the then Home Secretary, appointed a committee presided over by Sir Alfred Hopkinson to look into the desirability of making legal provision for the adoption of infants—that is, anyone under 21 years old. They decided that the need was urgent, but over and again, across the debates that took place on some six private Members' bills in the following years to 1926 (when the Adoption of Children Act was passed), Members of Parliament worried about the 'very serious effect of severing the tie between mother and child'.[46] The provisions of the Act itself allowed married couples to adopt jointly, and single persons to adopt. There were restrictions on a single man adopting an infant female—which some members of the House of Lords felt cast 'an unnecessary slur on the morals of the male sex'—while other Lords regretted that there was no provision for 'two maiden ladies' to adopt.[47] The evidence of these debates is interesting because it suggests how, even in the 1920s, the concept of the 'family' and of what that might consist, was far from the supposed ideal of father, mother and two children.[48]

[45] Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870–1908*, p.29.

[46] 'The Adoption of Children Bill', 26 Feb. 1926: *Parliamentary Debates, Commons* (1926), vol. 192, Feb. 22–March 12, column 919.

[47] *Parliamentary Debates, Lords* (1926), vol. 65, 28 July 1926, column 325.

[48] Human geographers generally recognise that the imagined 'universal' unit of father, mother and two children is one which only came anywhere near to actually existing (and even then, mostly in the popular imagination and in the hopes of the legislators) during the twenty years following the 1939–45 war.

But the overriding focus of the 1926 Adoption of Children Act, as is clear from the debates as well as the legislation itself, was that any adoption order 'will be for the welfare of the infant, due consideration being for this purpose given to the wishes of the infant, having regard to the age and understanding of the infant'.[49] That principle remains the same in adoption practice in Britain today and it has had widespread influence on adoption legislation throughout the world.

When We Were Very Young

A. A. Milne's collection *When We Were Very Young* was published in 1924. His second volume of poems for children, *Now We Are Six*, appeared in 1927, so the two dates span the period of the passing of the 1926 Adoption Act.[50] *When We Were Very Young* is, like the other poems and collections discussed in this essay, of its time. It is about a family order where the child is at the centre and yet, at the same time, this is a collection which composes and wards off the dangerous 'corner of the street | Where the three roads meet'. 'Corner-of-the-Street' is the first poem in the collection:

> Down by the corner of the street,
> Where the three roads meet,
> And the feet
> Of the people as they pass go 'Tweet-tweet-tweet',
> Who comes tripping round the corner of the street?
> One pair of shoes which are Nurse's;
> One pair of slippers which are Percy's . . .
> Tweet! Tweet! Tweet!

As with Christina Rossetti, Milne's poems look simple enough. They probably seem all the simpler to readers reading now in middle age because they are familiar from their own childhood and from their parents' childhood. But, as with Christina Rossetti, these poems have their antecedents in other poems about and for children. In his Preface to *When We Were Very Young*, A. A. Milne wrote:

> At one time (but I have changed my mind now) I thought I was going to write a little note at the top of each of these poems, in the manner of Mr William

[49] 16 & 17 Geo. V (1926), c. 29, 3 (b).

[50] A. A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young* (1924), and *Now We Are Six* (1927), in *Winnie-The-Pooh: The Complete Collection of Stories and Poems*, with illustrations by E. H. Shephard (London, 2001), pp. 250–335 and 336–432.

> Wordsworth who liked to tell his readers where he was staying, and which of his friends he was walking with, and what he was thinking about, when the idea of writing his poem came to him.

In fact, Milne's annotations were not necessary because the secure world Christopher Robin inhabits is so sure. Or rather, because the *fantasy* of the secure world that Christopher Robin inhabits is so sure *in the wishful imagination of his readers* (old and young) that it needs no explanation. In 'Buckingham Palace' it is easy to construct the image of Christopher Robin's world: he lives in a patriarchal order where Daddy hardly ever appears but where his controlling presence is over all, where Alice—Mummy's substitute and second—is marrying one of the guards, and where the larger life of the Empire is certain, like the little life of the cared-for child, because the King 'knows all about me' and it is always 'time for tea':

> They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace—
> Christopher Robin went down with Alice.
> Alice is marrying one of the guard.
> 'A soldier's life is terrible hard,'
> Says Alice.

But the real reason why it is so very easy to conjure up Christopher Robin's world is because it is not a real world, but an imagined world that we can all share. At the same time this is also a book about the child alone, secure in his own identity (in poems like 'Happiness'), and capable of shaping and naming his own world in poems like 'The Christening':

> What shall I call
> My dear little dormouse?
> His eyes are small,
> But his tail is e-nor-mouse.
>
> I sometimes call him Terrible John,
> 'Cos his tail goes on—
> And on—
> And on.
> And I sometimes call him Terrible Jack,
> 'Cos his tail goes on to the end of his back.
> And I sometimes call him Terrible James,
> 'Cos he says he likes me calling him names. . . .
>
> But I think I shall call him Jim,
> 'Cos I *am* fond of him.

If Christopher Robin's happy family and national life is a phantasm, the promotion of his secure sense of identity and purpose is propaganda

designed both to inculcate those virtues in the child and to reassure adults of the child's independence and resilience in the face of the horrors of the world. Almost all of the poems in *When We Were Very Young* repeat these patterns and concerns to do with identity and naming and self assurance. They go on right up to the concluding pages which, like Rossetti's *Sing-Song*, end with a poem that is a lullaby, and a prayer, and where Christopher Robin is, crucially, on his own:

> Oh! *Thank you, God, for a lovely day*
> And what was the other I had to say?
> I said 'Bless Daddy', so what can it be?
> Oh! Now I remember it. *God bless me*.[51]

Now We Are Six

Now We Are Six begins and carries on in the same way; the opening poem in the volume is 'Solitude':

> I have a house where I go
> When there's too many people,
> I have a house where I go
> Where no one can be;
> I have a house where I go,
> Where nobody ever says 'No'
> Where no one says anything—so
> There is no one but me.

There are very few adults here either in the pictures or the poems, and if that means that the child in this poetry flirts with the risk of being displaced, of being lost and forgotten and alone in the world, his independence, and individuality of will is still guaranteed as in the opening and ending to 'Forgotten':

> Lords of the Nursery
> Wait in a row,
> Five on the high wall,
> And four on the low;
> Big Kings and Little Kings,
> Brown Bears and Black,
> All of them waiting
> Till John comes back . . .

[51] It is indicative of the national and social psychological investment in ideas to do with childhood at this time that this particular poem was written for, and still belongs to, the library of Queen Mary's dolls house.

What's become of John boy?
Nothing at all,
He played with his skipping rope,
He played with his ball.
He ran after butterflies,
Blue ones and red;
He did a hundred happy things—
And then went to bed.

With 'In The Dark' the collection again ends with the child alone though safe and secure because 'they've all of them been | And kissed me lots | They've all of them said "Good-night"'. Once this background is filled in, the child can turn inward untrammelled and self-directed, and imagine himself into a new existence, into a future of self-construction and self-definition as he falls asleep. In all these seemingly innocent poems the new contemporary attitudes to children, as enshrined in the Adoption Act, allowed for some autonomy, for the 'wishes' of the child to be taken into account.

So—here I am in the dark alone,
There's nobody here to see;
I think to myself
I play to myself,
And nobody knows what I say to myself;
Here I am in the dark alone,
What is it going to be?
I can think whatever I like to think,
I can play whatever I like to play,
I can laugh whatever I like to laugh,
There's nobody here but me.

I'm talking to a rabbit . . .
I'm talking to the sun . . .
I think I am a hundred—
I'm one.
I'm lying in a forest . . .
I'm lying in a cave . . .
I'm talking to a Dragon . . .
I'm BRAVE.
I'm lying on my left side . . .
I'm lying on my right . . .
I'll play a lot tomorrow . . .
. . . . . .
I'll think a lot tomorrow . . .
. . . . . .
I'll laugh. . ..
a lot . . .

tomorrow . . .
(*Heigh-ho!*)
Good-night.

'So I think I'll be six now for ever and ever'

Who speaks children's poetry?

It is a question that A. A. Milne himself addresses in his Preface to *When We Were Very Young,* but his very formulation allows for freedom of choice, according to the wishes of the child:

> You may wonder sometimes who is supposed to be saying the verses. Is it the Author, that strange but uninteresting person, or is it Christopher Robin, or some other boy or girl, or Nurse, or Hoo? If I had followed Mr Wordsworth's plan I could have explained this each time; as it is, you will have to decide for yourselves.

Far from having one voice, the child in poetry has many. And far from 'children's poetry' and 'children's literature' always being the same, an identifiable genre, it varies to reflect the concerns of its own time and the treatment of real children in its own time. If the ideal of childhood—innocent, unwritten on, removed and separate from contemporary social concerns—was always a phantom even at the times when it was supposed to be most real, that is from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, then the idea that the literature of childhood was similarly isolated—removed, special, involved in its own magic space and separate from contemporary social concerns—is equally phantasmagoric.[52]

In historical fact, real children lived lives in a world that was the same as the adult world—complicated, messy, difficult, painful. Far from being an oddity, it was the displaced child—translated from the supposed 'ideal' of the family unit—who was the normal child. It was those real displaced children who—at different times and in different ways—drove the imaginative energies that formed children's literature. It was the idea of the Foundling, alone and isolated in nature, by the roadside, or in the

[52] In her article on *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* Christine Sutphin tells a very revealing story about a book by Fred Cody called *Make-Believe Summer: A Victorian Idyll* (New York, 1980). Cody was inspired by Arthur Boyd Houghton's illustrations to *Home Scenes* to write a story based on them. But the narrative which he composes is one that insists on 'a charming depiction of middle-class Victorian life . . . to tell the story of the children and their idyllic summer on an English farm'. See Christine Sutphin, 'Victorian Childhood. Reading Beyond the "Innocent Title": *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*' in Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *New Approaches to Children's Literature*, pp. 68–71.

busy street, that lay in the margins of Isaac Watts's collections and in *Mother Goose,* and that reappeared in Blake's writings or Wordsworth's picture of himself on the hill overlooking the two roads. It was the idea of the Lostlings, the suffering children on the outside, attested to by the Factory Acts and the Infant Life Preservation Act and all the rest of the late nineteenth century's reforming legislation, who haunted the contradictory, ever shifting boundaries of Christina Rossetti's not-so-safe nursery in *Sing-Song*. It was the notion of the Changeling—removed from one place to another with its 'wishes' taken into account, because of an autonomy, apparently legally guaranteed by the Adoption Act, but, in reality, forced upon the many children who had to take care of their own lives because there was no one else to care for them—it was that Changeling child that informed the peculiarly solitary poems of A. A. Milne.

While the old, idealised, pretty image of the child and childhood never did exist either in the real world, nor in literature by, for and to children, it *did* exert a pull on the popular imagination and it did have an effect. To some extent, all the various charitable efforts and moral reforms directed at children's lives were driven by that ideal (however imaginary), and represented a striving towards it. But then, sometimes an absence can be more powerful than a presence. Think of the apocryphal story of the discarded scrap in Samuel Beckett's waste paper basket where he had written: 'Act I, scene 1 . . . Enter Godot'.

In the early twenty-first century we still hanker for the phantom ideal of 'childhood'. Our nostalgia for an innocence in children and childhood makes us anxious to protect something that never did exist and may not be possible. Worse still, on the Alice Miller model of 'the drama of being a child' we are nostalgic for our own lost childhoods of uncluttered happiness and security that—more than likely—we never did have and never could have had.[53] In spite of the facts and contrary to all the evidence—in the history of social ills and social reform, and in the literature that reflects that history—we still want to be six 'for ever and ever', just as Christopher Robin says in 'The End':

> When I was One,
> I had just begun.
>
> When I was Two,
> I was nearly new.

[53] Alice Miller, *The Drama of Being A Child and the Search for the True Self* (London, 1987).

When I was Three,
I was hardly Me.

When I was Four,
I was not much more.

When I was Five,
I was just alive.

But now I am Six, I'm clever as clever.
So I think I'll stay six now for ever and ever.

It may be, that the best kind of children's literature being produced now is that which recognises that children live in a real world that is puzzling and painful, but which is still sophisticated enough to know about the phantom of this lost ideal—in time, place, childhood and youth—and allows for its haunting, persistent resilence. One example might be in Nick Sharratt's strange and hallucinatory illustrations for Jacqueline Wilson's *Midnight*—a story for today about adoption and dispersed families and displaced children. But Sharratt's illustrations draw on and reinterpret the cradle from *Mother Goose* or from Arthur Hughes's pictures for *Sing-Song*. They remind us too of the haunting lostlings in Arthur Rackham's illustrations to *Peter Pan*—who is also part of the long history of the foundling.[54]

It may be that the best poetry about, for and to children is that which acknowledges 'the child' as multiple, various, difficult. 'The child' is not a blank page, but written over, many layered, a palimpsest of the displacements of imagery and metaphor, found, lost, changed—just like poetry itself.

Angela Leighton's 'Icarus on the Beach' was written for me, and I cannot now recall how much of our discussions about literature—and about life—might have gone into the poem. What I do recognise is the imagery of the geological stratifications that layer the facts of history with the ideas of literature. I recognise too the haphazardness of the encounter, and the slipperiness of the 'sandlings' that 'flicker' into being my foundlings, lostlings and changelings of the past and the present.

They seem to shoulder air with ease, these bony children,
buckling to, like sudden folding Z's,

[54] Jacqueline Wilson, *Midnight* (London, 2003), pp. 2 and 150. J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (London, 1906), and J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens,* ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford, 1999).

on hassocked sand,
landing themselves on its slippery territory.

Tricked out of air, were they? Into shins and elbows and knees,
hitched into limbs, the thin rigging of bone
underpinning
self's strange sense, its reach and ending.

That paper-pattern fragility is ours, rearranged.
Consistencies survive and leave a print.
Shadowy,
as shale laminae layered in bedding-planes,

the understated, oscillating shoulder-blades—
gear-shifts behind the flickering adept hands
that build, in play,
landownerships: small castles against the waves.

Children come like homing creatures here, sandlings,
still summering for a season, feeling the sea
repeat, revise
its long, slow breathing exercise.

They seem like tidings left by the turned, returning tide,
a story's incomplete completion told
through each self's
visible risky precision, its lonely device.

Turning now, I see them only where, so far,
sea's fluent border shifts a weight.
Waves and dunes
absorb them. Matter haunts them like a ghost.

Out of our hands, they seem, so distantly composed,
cradled from air and water, quartz and schist,
children found
in the making of what goes, and has to live.[55]

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[55] Angela Leighton, 'Icarus on the Beach' (2003).