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Caught in the Middle: Arendt, Childhood and Responsibility

James C. Conroy

Childhood: An Introduction

It would be good to give much thought, before
You try to find words for something so lost,
For those childhood afternoons you know
That vanished so completely—and why?

We're still reminded -:sometimes by a rain
But we can no longer say what it means;
Life was never again so filled with meeting,
With reunion and with passing on

As back then, when nothing happened to us
Except what happens to things and creatures:

Rainer Maria Rilke

On a late spring morning in the early 1960s, the sun was warm as I walked the three miles from my home to school in the nearby village. I enlivened the daily walk by running between, and hiding behind, electricity poles, shooting imaginary enemies with uncanny accuracy using my imaginary gun. As I walked through the village and down the small road to the two-roomed stone schoolhouse, I was struck at how quiet everything was and entertained a delight that I had made such progress as to be in school before anyone else had arrived (there was always a certain pride in being first into school). After a few minutes sitting on the wall soaking up the sun, I noticed that the paint-flaked door was open and cautiously (because I couldn't understand how anyone else could be so early as to have opened the school) walked across the playground. On pushing open the classroom door I realised, to my complete horror, that the classroom was quietly humming with activity and the teacher, Mrs O'Brien, was writing at the board. In a mixture of fear and disbelief I looked at the clock, which read 11.05. Anticipating disaster, I burst into tears. Fortunately I was the unexpected beneficiary of a certain benign concern and no questions were asked nor admonishments meted out.

Nevertheless, over half a lifetime later those events remain somewhat perplexing to me—where had the time gone? What had I been doing? Why was this particular day, so like every other day, so different? More philosophically—is it possible that my recollected experience discloses something of the reality about which many psychologists have written: that young children, on occasion, subjectively inhabit a different spatio-temporal world? Such questions are of course all too readily dissolved into a kind of loose and easily-parodied rhetoric about the daydream-tinted spaces of childhood. It remains possible, nevertheless, that these spaces may indeed be psycho-spatially different from those inhabited by adults. Their difference may be seen in an experience that might possibly be described as an ‘inner surplus of meaning and significance’, not captured by the explanatory constraints of social existence as commonly constructed in the language and practices of adulthood. It is this imaginative surplus which is, in some important respects, captured in Rilke’s poem. It is this surplus, and its meanings, that is the theme of this essay.

Rilke’s poem alludes to the way in which our memories, especially those of our childhood, are inclined, in a general sense, to dim and, arguably, succumb eventually to recuperation by the frames of a very different, adult, heuristic; one which employs not only the explanatory practices of adulthood, but also its ready dismissal of the imagined porosity between the world of the child and the category we call imagination; a porosity which, many romantics have suggested, is revealed in the distinctive shape of time, space and relationships typified by the singular childhood experience narrated above. Let me offer a further autobiographical illustration and clarification in this regard. When I was a child I had a red tin saloon toy car. It was, I thought, a magnificent machine and I would play for many hours on the kitchen floor driving the car around and around. But I was not, in the way we as adults normally understand the relationship between the self and the object, *outside* the car pushing it around the floor. Rather, I felt physically *inside* the car, accelerating and

decelerating, shifting gear and steering; in other words not pushing but actually *driving* it. In the world of the imagination the relationship between child and car was not marked by the common distinction between the limitations of the material world and the possibilities afforded by the surplus of a transposing imagination—that is, an imagination which did not know and had not learned to be constrained by how things actually appear to rational understanding. It may not be unreasonable to suggest that any failure to allow space for such free roaming imaginative growth (in, for example, kindergartens championing a ‘rational’ skills-based pre-5 curriculum) is likely to have an adverse effect on the capacity of children to engage with and embrace the world in all its complexity. Increasingly in contemporary education any sense of difference between the worlds of the child and that of the adult has disappeared. Childhood, with its distinctive frames and concerns, is understood to be different from adulthood only with respect to intensity and capacity—that is, the full concerns, anxieties and obsessions of adulthood are increasingly to be afforded space in childhood in a reduced but entirely recognisable form.

Influenced by Hannah Arendt’s criticisms of Deweyan pragmatism in education, and the unwillingness of adults to assume political responsibility for the world, this essay starts with the premise that whatever social construction may be laid upon it, the concept of childhood is historically speaking no mere artifice or artifact of early modernity. Rather, it is to be seen as a discrete stage within a person’s life, albeit one exhibiting significant porosity with the stages before (infancy) and after (adulthood) it. In the course of these reflections I will also touch on some of the complex contradictions that, not infrequently, hedge and press in on childhood and schooling in the present era as a result of the erosion of long-established boundaries between childhood and adulthood. It is a contention of this essay that these contradictions, at one and the same time, lay responsibilities on the shoulders of children for tasks and decisions for which they are ill-suited, while simultaneously

subjecting the young to a barrage of controls and regulatory practices which fail to protect for them their own spaces *qua* child.

In arguing for the dynamic rehabilitation of a separate space called *childhood* there is always a danger of being seen to follow Rousseau in his problematic attempt to preserve a romanticized state of nature (though arguably the romantic conception is not quite as offensive as some recent theorists would have us believe) in which symbolically to locate young children. This essay rejects all naively sentimentalist notions of childhood in favour of the more nuanced approach taken by, for example, an authentically romantic artist such as the poet William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and epitomised in such meditations as the contrasting pair of poems each with the title 'Nurses Song'. In these poems we find an approach that recognizes that, while children enjoy a capacity for wisdom, insight and critical assessment—in addition to a certain wry worldliness—this capacity does not entail that they must thereby assume the burden of the world as it is confronted by adults. In arguing this Blakean case I will explore the implications of the current imperative in liberal political economies to pressgang schooling into the service of a particularly truncated view of human flourishing one with frankly predatory designs on childhood directly descended from an industrial worldview held in some suspicion by William Blake. In pursuing this line of argument, I do not wish to abjure the claims of the political or to insulate the young entirely from it. I am rather more inclined to Orwell's view that the rupture of childhood by adult encroachments and 'violence' simultaneously conduces to a desolate loneliness and a sense of its inevitable transitoriness (Orwell 1968). Indeed, it is important to recognise that the public funding of schooling is a civic and, indeed, a political act. Education (and schooling as its shape and locus) is ineluctably concerned with the preparation of children for adulthood and the adult social world. Nevertheless, and despite entrenched ambiguities at the heart of the relationship between schooling and education, I

wish to argue that the current and overt preoccupation with the anxieties and concerns of adulthood circulating through our schools may in fact undermine childhood; may be damaging to children and may ultimately subvert the very goals aimed at by those who would insinuate the anxieties of adulthood into the spaces of childhood. In the long run, if we wish that our children become thoughtful, active and just people, we may need to put in place certain kinds of protection for them. Seedlings exposed too long to harsh and forbidding conditions to which they are not suited are unlikely to survive as strong healthy plants.

The argument here blends two themes each of which is predicated on the belief, articulated elsewhere in this volume, that there is a state called childhood, which is no mere ‘invention’ of early modernity. The interwoven strands are, first, that the boundaries between adulthood and childhood no longer exhibit a specific porosity but have been dissolved by an increasing elision of the distinction between the public and the private. This elision has, as Hannah Arendt put it, resulted in the rise of ‘the social’—a space where people’s appetites and desires, their entire emotional lives indeed, have become matters of public interest and debate resulting in a range of behaviours that substitute for the political. Arguably, what was the political (the sphere of justice and action) has been conscripted into serving only the social. Such a rubbing away at the boundaries has resulted in the loss of a vital *liminal* space where childhood was supposed to be offered some protection from the voracious encroachments of the politico-economic concerns of the realm of adults. Secondly, the argument contends that adults are not licensed to abnegate their responsibilities for the world as it is, nor prescind from assuming those responsibilities. Adults may not simply transfer such responsibility to the next generation. To refuse to accept responsibility, or to outsource it to those not in a position to assume such a burden, is morally unacceptable. After all, we have evolved over long generations a number of important legal, moral and institutional safeguards in the ‘agora’ to ensure that the blameless are not held accountable

for the behaviours of others, over whom they have no control. We are unlikely to think it morally acceptable that we punish a child for her father's misdeeds. In the relations between child and adult in the modern era these basic principles are often neglected and sometimes completely forgotten.

Let me at this stage return to Rilke's evocation of the adult gaze on childhood, most especially his invitation to 'give much thought, before [we] try to find words for something so lost'. Adults are not children; childhood is something that is, in Rilke's sense, lost to us. What might be described as the *presentness* of our moment is constituted by—and indeed *in*—our being adults and we need to consider carefully what constitutes the distinctive stage childhood. As the immediacy of our own childhood fades, it may be that we tend to inflect our memory of that state with perceptions which draw upon those resources that accrue to us as a consequence of our having experienced, reflected upon—indeed, lived in and loved—the world over a prolonged period of time; in other words, through the application of resources that we have garnered by virtue of becoming and being adult. The lens of the adult, living and operating (in a Western context) within the orbit of a liberal democratic polity, may then project on to the condition of childhood particular conceptions of voice, representation and engagement that are fully appropriate for adult actors within the polity but may not be so for children. There is little doubt that the evolution of this propensity has been boosted institutionally by the influence of the Aries hypothesis on the construction of childhood—a hypothesis which, despite being subjected to trenchant historical criticism (articulated in other essays in this volume), retains a potent shaping energy in political and professional discussions of childhood. This can readily be seen in a wide range of contemporary works concerned with childhood. For example, Valentine opines, 'Aries...argues that in the middle ages children were seen as miniature adults... It was only in the sixteenth century that children started to be defined in opposition to adults... *In other words childhood is a social*

invention'. This uncritical commonplace has lent itself to a certain looseness of both expression and intimation, with Craig's echoing of the mantra that 'childhood...is not a fixed concept and is, in any case, *an adult construction*'. Perhaps the most egregious recent example of is to be seen in Anne Higonnet's celebrated photographic account of the 'sexualised imaginary', which, she asserts, has besieged infancy and early childhood. Arguing that childhood innocence represents no more than the fruits of an eighteenth century Romantic fiction, Higonnet reiterates Valentine's claim that the very conceit of childhood innocence is mere invention; an invention which has 'run its course, and is now being replaced by another way of picturing childhood'. While acknowledging that the sexualised images of children provocative in, and evocative of, late industrial cultures, are frequently disturbing, Higonnet appears nevertheless to be content to endorse this development. Among her many comments on the subject, her suggestion that 'the image of childhood innocence is now in jeopardy not just because it is being violated, but because it was seriously flawed all along' would suggest that she has little enough sympathy for the notion of childhood *per se*. Much of this is built, without any trace of self-doubt, on the very shaky foundations of Aries' work. Of course, once it is determined that childhood is indeed an invention and has no essential, even developmental, characteristics, then children can continue to enjoy neither a privileged position nor any immunity from the world of adults.

Political Economy and the Displacement of Adult Anxieties

The emphasis on acknowledging and valorising at an early age the rights of children, their political literacy (under the guise of citizenship education), their economic literacy, their instruction in safe sex, and so on, all indeed appear as if they represented decisions taken with the best interests of the child at heart. No doubt many of those who nurture the intellectual and social climate that underpins the making of decisions to teach very young children about

both the varieties and the dangers of sex, a concern with economic performance etc., are motivated by good intentions. But good intentions are rarely sufficient in the provision of an authentic service to children; in this instance service may be best pursued by recognising that children are not, *as children*, responsible for the adult world of social, moral, political and economic decision-making.

Of course any account of educational purpose and practice has to be nuanced given that, in every age, it is shaped by the perceived needs of the particular political community within which it is sited. However, late industrial consumer capitalist societies have installed a politics of relevance as the *grundchrift* for all educational practices. From thinking skills through to health education, the curriculum is increasingly dominated by the anxieties of adults concerning the world which they, *qua* adults, have created. Repeatedly we attempt to assuage these anxieties by reproducing them in the classroom as if the classroom were the site where they are properly to be addressed and resolved. The three issues highlighted above (that is, political literacy, economic literacy and responsible awareness of human sexuality) are a not quite random selection of the many anxieties that have emerged as ‘crucial’ to education. They are accorded importance, of course, because they each represent contested political ground where both the political Right and the political Left lay claim to reliable teaching about these matters, but from opposing perspectives, and with a stated desire to realise contrary goals.

Let me explore a couple of these issues briefly and suggest reasons why they might be problematic when set against the relationship of the child to public and private space as these categories have been adumbrated for us in, especially, the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. In the first case, that of political literacy, the impulse to instantiate it in the curriculum in Britain originated in a 1990 report of the former Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill. It subsequently secured widespread support from a range of professionals in and

beyond education, starting with the Report of political scientist, Bernard Crick. In its turn, the Crick Report and consequent legislation have secured fairly widespread approval within the teaching profession as well as among other child-related professionals, politicians, philosophers, political scientists and public commentators. Indeed it would be hard to find any voice of demurral, the consensus in favour being so overwhelming. Grounded in a conflation of liberal theory and civic republicanism, the resultant emergence of Citizenship Education has been driven, and not just in the recent British case, as Crick observes, by political events rather than political theory. Our perception and understanding of these events, probably best described as trends or happenings, is shaped by anxiety at what is felt to be a deterioration in the social fabric. Sometimes the perceptions are grounded in manifest social phenomena, sometimes in little more than a vague nostalgia for a more organic past. The contexts have included a perceived growth in unruly and anti-social behaviour of the young, a decline in parental supervision, control and responsibility, and, from Crick's point of view at least, a decline in voter participation. A reasonable response to the last of these was thought to be the introduction of citizenship and political education in schools. This intervention, it was believed, would increase political and civic participation and concomitantly reduce the disaffection and antisocial behaviour of children and adolescents, As Crick puts it, government was persuaded that citizenship education should be brought into being because it believed that this was a 'necessary condition for a more inclusive society, or for helping diminish exclusion from schools, cynicism, welfare-dependency, apathy, petty criminality and vandalism, and the kind of could-not-care-lessitude towards voting and public issues unhappily prevalent among young people'. It is not entirely clear how, or even *that*, Citizenship Education could offer some kind of panacea to such a roll-call of problems, but even if it could, there are more serious difficulties to be confronted about the nature of childhood and socialisation associated with its underlying vision, and the resultant practice of

politics, to which I shall return.

Allied to the outworkings of globalization, the once immutable institutions that made up the fabric of society have undoubtedly become increasingly fluid and unpredictable. This, in turn, has bred a certain insecurity. One significant response to ‘the processes of detraditionalization and disembedding [has seen the production of] an environment characterised by ontological insecurity—doubts about one’s identity, careers and biography. In such a world... people have no alternative but to develop individualized and reflexive approaches to the management of their life projects—in their search for trust and ontological security.’. It is no great leap from admitting this reality to recognising the problems that it entails for the maintenance and nurturance of our political structures. In an epoch where little distinction is to be made between the imperatives of citizenship and those of economic productivity, it is perhaps unsurprising that these two issues emerge at the top of the political agenda and often as virtually indistinguishable. The erasure of any gap between them may be clearly seen in particular British Prime Ministerial comments on the attachment to markets as necessary for the support of democracy. Being a good citizen is deemed to entail not only that one exercise certain democratically enfranchised rights, but also be an economically productive member of the political community.

There is of course nothing particularly new in the impulse to conjoin economy and political community in what we tend to see as ‘political economy’. However recent Government initiatives—in not only the UK and the United States but also across late industrial polities more generally—has released a new energy in seeing school as directly tied to the preparation for specific kinds of adult life. Indeed, some would argue it is the natural outworking of human association where labour as subsistence has been displaced by work, which then forms the basis of exchange between people. Political economy is itself the natural consequence of the erasure of the distinction between the public and the private—in

the category Arendt saw as ‘the social’. And if there is no distinction between these spheres of activity, then schools, it may justly be argued, are indeed appropriate locations for the induction of the young into this space of the social. Both Left and Right see this movement as largely unproblematic, since clearly any reasonable conception of education would, necessarily, reflect the expressed needs of a community to prepare children to enter fully into the social world of that community. It is hardly difficult to find examples of political groups clamouring to have their particular area of interest represented in the curriculum or—and perhaps this is more frequent—to get some other group’s interests blocked.

Re-ordering Education from the Left.

Those who might loosely be described as ‘radicals’ in contemporary educational theory (Henri Giroux, Peter McLaren, Michael Peters and so on) see schooling as a primary site (or even primarily *a* site) for cultural contestation. Here teachers are to be construed as cultural workers whose object is, on behalf of and through children, the creation of an alternative social and political order predicated on redistributive justice and critical participatory democracy. Perhaps their lens would be better trained on the adult world of political action, which has occasioned the collapse of democratic participation in the first place. If the real issue is political disenfranchisement as a problem of constitutional imbalance between the efficient (executive) parts of government and the representation of the people through what Bagehot deemed ‘the dignified part of government’ (parliamentary representation), then it is the constitutional imbalance itself which needs to be addressed. This cannot be done merely through the expansion of suffrage, directly or indirectly.

Tangentially attached to, but forming a slightly different stream from, these critical theorists are those who have trained their professional gaze on the entitlements and voices of children. Educationalists, social work theorists and child protection lawyers loom large here.

Taking up an Aries-like position, they regard families as essentially partakers in the social contract of the political community, the consequence of which is that the claims of the state always trump those of family. Schools, in this account, function as an extension of the state; are places shaped to challenge familial attachments. Historically, such a move is at odds with what de Coulanges would have described as an intergenerational covenant, where the relationship between child and adult—between the present generation and past generations—is a sacred bond of trust. Moreover, Dupont also points out that public duty was formerly itself grounded in the private domain of the family. The family could perform this grounded function precisely because it was intergenerational passing on; family was a sacred, as much as an organizational or economic unit. What made ‘families private was not the intimacy of the conjugal union but the enclosure (*Penates*) within which the sacred rites of the family were practices. Property was private because the grave was private and could not be confounded with another.’ All of this leads one to suggest that the family was indeed, classically, a private space dominated by a covenant which was, and remains, a locus of attachment and concern linking past and future. This covenant is rooted in the belief that one’s ancestors would mediate with the gods on one’s behalf and one’s descendants would reciprocate. While the ontogenesis of this intergenerational covenant might be the ever-present reality of mortality, it has had through the ages very real and practical consequences. These have included protection of the elderly by their progeny, as well as of the young by their parents. The actions of one’s forbearers have an impact on their descendants. Gradually the fibres of this covenant have been strained and weakened so that, for example, the elderly nowadays often spend their final years in nursing homes and the young much of their daylight hours in nurseries. With the dissolution of these older forms of association the state increasingly accrues to itself not only the responsibility but also the right to interfere in the private spaces. Education becomes a major vehicle for accomplishing

this.

In political communities firmly immersed in rights talk, education is seen as a zone for extending these rights. Often predicated on the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, such rights are given concrete form by the appeal to voice and self-determination. Children, we are informed, have rights to be heard and to a greater or lesser extent rights to be allowed to shape their own personal educational projects. Let us at this point leave aside the somewhat anomalous status of the claim that the social project of Left-leaning liberals to re-sew the torn fabric of collective projects is best served by creating individual and or self-determining educational portfolios to concentrate instead on the claims themselves. Of course children should be treated with graciousness and courtesy, but this does not imply that adults should not make determining decisions as the persons responsible for the political world in which schools are situated in the first place. At the more extreme end of the rights advocates continuum are a number of child liberationists who argue that children should have entirely the same position in the public domain as adults. Accordingly, they hold that children should be self-determining with respect to schooling, relationships, contractual obligations and so on. Clearly such a view is predicated on the notion of *agency*. Children are not, on this account, subjects to whom we do things but are agents in their own right. Even more modest advocates of the voice of children can fall into the trap of assuming that the political and social challenges of disaffected politics and disaffected youth may be dealt with simply by listening harder. In a recent major UK study, young people's expectations of adult responses to their problems are catalogued. These responses were reported by the authors as generally negative. One young respondent suggested that he would not tell his mother about 'stuff'...because she always gives me a lecture and she, like, just gets upset if I've done something really bad, like if I've tried to set the Primary school on fire or something like and she gets really upset...' The authors' conclusions included the

approving observation that ‘the young people...made a range of suggestions of ways in which formal services could be improved...including the provision of more information, listening sympathetically...and avoiding ‘lectures’ and condemnation [which] illustrates the valuable role which research can play in shaping social policies and practices when the research seeks to learn from and identify and learn from young people’s lives and experiences.’ It is difficult to know what to make of such claims. In what way, one is tempted to ask, would *not* condemning the actions of a young person intent on burning down a school help to shape social policy? What is abundantly evident here is an abrogation of adult responsibility for the world. To prescind from making normative judgments about the appropriateness and acceptability of particular kinds of activity and behaviour on the part of the young is to renege on our fundamental ethical responsibility for the world.

Cultural Reproduction and Economic Growth

Those on the political Right, and those creating both the conservative policy agenda and its practical outworkings in education, have historically tended to opt for a model of cultural reproduction. More recently, under the influence of think tanks such as the Manhattan Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies, Right-leaning intellectuals have become increasingly proactive in their efforts to determine the curriculum in the hope of shaping students as particular kinds of economically literate and consuming (and, somewhat paradoxically, not infrequently religious) citizens. In doing so, children are increasingly to be seen in these models as human resources, and citizenship education as a means for securing well motivated and positively disposed citizens who will make a significant or substantial economic contribution to the well-being of the community. While the Republicans in the United States have wanted to do this through a realignment of the funding of schools, the Democrats have entertained not dissimilar impulses in their desire to reinvent public

education so that schools produce well trained workers to meet the needs of businesses competing in the global economy. The *No Child Left Behind* initiative represents the most obvious manifestation of this tendency. The purpose of Sub-part 13 'Excellence in Economic Education' is 'to promote economic and financial literacy among all students in kindergarten through grade 12' by awarding a competitive grant to a national nonprofit educational organization that has as its primary purpose the improvement of the quality of student understanding of personal finance and economics.

Equally, but from widely divergent perspectives, all three groups discussed above problematise childhood. For groupings on the Left, children are oppressed, their needs are ignored, their voice is unheard and they suffer from inappropriate asymmetrical power relations. Consequently they are in need of some kind of liberation. For those on the Right, children harbour the potential for *dissensus*, which needs to be corralled and controlled so that they may make their contribution to social harmony and economic success. Of course, even the labels Left and Right here are no more than mere approximations here, which demonstrate a range of complex overlaps. Schools attempt to mediate between these opposing attitudes, now swinging in one direction, now in the other. Consequently, children (and teachers who work with them) are subjected to a host of conflicting and contradictory expectations which result in their being ill-equipped to deal with the world as it appears in and to them. What is unearthed in the analysis of this development is the sometimes extraordinarily crude manner in which the school space has been appropriated as a public space, the purpose of which is to promote a particular kind of future. I shall return to this point shortly.

From the Economic to the Social

In moving from the realm of political participation to wider social and political

engagement, we can see similar kinds of forces at play in the lives of children and schools. Many of our dealings with childhood in and beyond school today are striated with contradiction and confusion. This is manifest in a variety of forms. For example, while we may not expose our students to the lived horrors of war we may nonetheless show living images of these same horrors for some putatively pedagogic reasons. We may claim to want them to think freely and creatively and then designate the kinds of thoughts, reactions and reflections we deem appropriate. We may call for action but desire merely behaviour. It is this space of clashing and contradictory values that we find most challenging. We witness daily in our schools the profound confusion brought about by mass communication, where important issues emerge with respect to the imperatives of, for instance, sex education and the impact of television upon it. We can, for example, quite reasonably assume that the ubiquitous soap operas on our televisions are being presented to us as ‘family viewing’ given that they are programmed in the mid-evening when it might be supposed that there is the highest likelihood of adults and children in the same family collectively watching television. A leitmotif of these programmes is sexual promiscuity and infidelity. At family viewing time, therefore, we model some interesting behaviours to the young. Alongside this is the yet more difficult issue of the background ‘noise’ of themes of a sexual nature that almost continuously intrudes into the spaces of childhood. Here again we can see advertisements that clearly and calculatingly allude to a range of adult sexual activities—from using a vibrating washing machine in order to induce an orgasm, through to sexually predatory behaviour as a metaphor for one’s relationship to a car. The constant exposure of children to the language of sex as a kind of soundtrack of modernity is undoubtedly deemed by many to signal the liberated, at-ease-with-itself society that the young will enter upon their coming of age—and perhaps on that basis therefore entirely unproblematic. Arguably, however, it may well be inappropriate and the roots of this inappropriateness may lie in the underdevelopment of

sexual emotions in pre-pubescent children consuming this material, irresponsible manipulation of which can lead to their engaging in premature sexual activity that, in turn, induces psychological dysfunctionality and damage.

For children from early to mid pubescence (c. 11-15) plainly this raises a difficult issue, given that they do indeed exhibit a range of sexual emotions. These emotions, however, cannot be considered in isolation. Meaningful consent to their display depends on the existence of some stability over time with respect to both an individual's value system and their identity. Of course, it might be possible to defend on the basis of this judgement increased government censorship, on the grounds that continuous exposure of the young to graphic sexual imagery is injurious to children's flourishing. Such a move would itself open up more problems than it solves. One of the perennial demands of liberalism is that the state does not interfere unnecessarily in the lives of its citizens, with the consequence that it is difficult to know where any censorship line might be drawn. Moreover, the particular normative judgments that might be made with respect to acts of censorship can only be effected where there is some kind of common agreement about the transition from childhood to adulthood. Such agreement appears no longer exist in late-industrial polities. There is no single, and normatively accepted, point of transition; rather, there are a variety of transitions, which range over an ever-lengthening time span. This makes it increasingly difficult to found principles of censorship in agreed constructions of childhood and adolescence.

As an illustration, we might briefly look at the perplexed relationship between the Catholic Church and the Scottish State (under the various Labour administrations of the immediate post-devolution period) in the early years of the twentieth century. For the Left, and indeed the liberal state (when government dons such a guise), sex education is seen as a response to the social anxieties about, and economic costs of, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. For the Catholic Church, the same set of issues reflects a concern that

the historic shape of the intergenerational covenant that is the family is besieged and its fabric crumbling. Church and state, in their different ways, hope that teaching children will in time reverse these social failings. Again, both institutions are convinced that a very particular kind of education will ameliorate the crisis of the present. But this seeming conflict between Church and State may in fact disguise a shared underlying assumption that schools should operate as spaces of some protection, where children learn about appropriate relationships in an environment concerned with their welfare rather than their exploitation. While both parties may lay claim to have the interests of children at heart, it is difficult not to conclude that it is their own ideologies to which they have fundamental allegiance. Somehow, in a fleeting nod to a kind of loose utopianism, both sides adhere implicitly to the conviction that the next generation will refresh and renew that which they—as adult agents responsible for the world—have singularly failed to accomplish. Might it not rather be the case that, as responsible adults who are called to choose in the public political spaces, what we are likely to have taught children is no more than the art of dissembling and deferral, forever hoping that they, the newborn, will do what we failed to do? Ironically, in these confusions, all the parties, Left and Right, contribute to what Arendt saw as the present crisis in education because they all fail to offer any proper protection to children. Indeed, rather than offer protection, they each vie with the other to overwhelm childhood with the anxieties of adulthood as viewed through their own lenses. How, we might ask, can it be that we think it acceptable to place the responsibility for something on those who were never in a position to make choices in the first instance? After all, were we discussing adult criminal culpability and responsibility we are not likely to suggest that person X be held accountable for action B of person Y, where X never had any influence over the action in any event.

The thought of Hannah Arendt lies just below the surface of this essay at every turn. In this final section I would therefore like to turn more explicitly to her reflections on

childhood and education. Arendt is not easy to categorise but, with regard to children and education, she is a conservative believing that the 'cult of relevance', rooted in the thought of John Dewey's pragmatism, lies at the heart of a crisis of education. Relevance denudes the curriculum of resource and undermines authority because it masquerades as the ultimate rationale for education and simultaneously displaces a concern with anything that may not find immediate use in the classroom or in the future uses of political economy. The whole relevance agenda rests on the modern assumption that 'you can know and understand only that which you have done yourself'. Any knowledge or activity that does not rest on *my* experiences and fails to address the 'real world' must *ipso facto* be pointless. It is for this reason that training programmes for teachers are increasingly concerned with matters of pedagogy rather than matters of knowledge, as a consequence of which it might be argued that teachers are better and better at teaching less and less.

Much of the discussion in this essay has been about the evidence of a loss faith in the power of authority and of a loss of faith in the world itself. This loss of authority, Arendt suggests, 'is a symptom of that modern estrangement from the world which can be seen everywhere but which presents itself in especially radical and desperate form under the conditions of mass society.' Globalisation induces a world-alienating state because we, who must take responsibility for action in the public political sphere, are overwhelmed by the impossibility of the task of taking responsibility for the world. Hence we abandon our responsibilities and with them our authority. In so abandoning them we hand over to children our hope, having in fact taught them not to hope. If the public space is where adults escape from the particulars of their own biological necessities to engage in a communal reflection on how the affairs of the whole community are to be determined, then it is not the place for the child but for the adult since the adult is the one in possession of the power to escape into the public space.

Schools are not to be equated with the privacy of the home. Rather they are liminal or interstitial places, much in the senses discussed earlier. Firstly, the school stands between the public and the private and secondly, between adulthood and childhood—though admittedly there may be much overlap between the two. In doing so it acts as a buffer zone, a place where children can learn about the world without having to take responsibility for it. ‘The function of the school is to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living.’ Children should not be treated like adults; to do so is to burden them. Adults should shoulder that burden. Immediately I hear opponents say, ‘you can’t protect children from the world; it has already penetrated to the very heart of the home; there is no longer, if ever there was, a private space. Children must be exposed to the world otherwise they will not be prepared for it.’ Some of these objections I have addressed in the course of this essay, but let me deal explicitly here with the last and perhaps the most challenging objection: that children need to be exposed to the world. There are at least two responses to be made here. The first is the fact of what Arendt terms *natality*—the bringing into the world of that which is new precisely so that the world itself made be renewed. Each child brings new hope and that hope has to be offered the possibility of growing, away from the glare of a world which is already at that stage old. How, we might ask, are we to offer the opportunity to children that they create the new if all we ever put on offer is our own present? More prosaically, we might wish to respond to the objection that we must not hide the world as it is from children but bring them into contact with it in its brokenness as well as its fullness by pointing out that adults while still wanting to retain some authority, have actually lost confidence in the nature of that authority.

Those who promote the pedagogy of exposure tend to confuse and conflate the socio-political and the psychological. Often what they really seek is not a new politics but simply that children will leave school resilient so that they can robustly assume responsibility

for the public spaces when their time comes. However, there lies embedded here an unwarranted assumption—that exposure *ipso facto* makes one resilient. On the contrary, the creation of resilience may well require certain protections and withdrawals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of those very vulnerable children who Prime Ministers are so quick to identify as socio-political and economic problems (how often do we remind ourselves that social costs have a directly translatable/transferable value?) If these socially disruptive children are vulnerable because of their exposure to a range of behaviours including violence, sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol misuse, then surely the argument must be one that says children, normatively, should not be exposed to such things if they are to cultivate resilience. After all, we are generally not inclined to propose that we expose ourselves to a sexually transmitted infection so that we can build up immunity. Exposure, even exposure with suitably and ideally presented discussion and reflection of the kind beloved of liberal educators, is not self-evidently the way to establish and sustain resilience.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show that the account of childhood which has come to dominate the social and educational assumptions of late industrial polities is rooted in some significant misapprehensions and that, despite the substantial criticisms of the idea that childhood is fundamentally a late modern creation, the belief and its consequences endure—to the lasting detriment of children. Further, I have suggested that this belief has serious implications for not only the child but for adult responsibility. Of course, all of this raises further questions about what it is we *should* teach children. Such questions will have to await another essay, but it is worth intimating that renovated notions of authority and tradition (for the new is always based on the old), which rely not on the asymmetries of power in the world but the acceptance of responsibility for it, must play a part. If we fail in our duty to children, we

fail in our obligation to the world because we constantly defer action.

To fail to address the distinctiveness of childhood with its new possibilities is to leave something between each generation that is never resolved but reverberates just beneath like an unexpressed accusation. In his poem 'Seeing Things III', Seamus Heaney evokes the childhood memory of his farmer father who, having acquired a new horse sprayer, refused to allow the poet (then a child) to accompany him in employing it because it was 'too new fangled': 'bluestone might burn [him] in the eyes or [he] might scare the horse'. The poet whiling away the time sees his father out of the window coming back alone 'scatter-eyed/And daunted, strange without his hat,/his steps misguided, his ghosthood immanent.' The horse had pitched all, including himself, into the water and the poet ends his remembering thus:

That afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river.
And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.

As adults, as people concerned with and for children, it is our duty not to leave something between us that remains unresolved.