On Childhood, Wildness, and Freedom

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1. Critical Theory, the Other Child and the Wild Child

In his groundbreaking study of childhood in history, Philippe Ariès put forward the provocative claim that childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and was "discovered" in Western societies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[1] This claim opened up a heated scholarly controversy, but no one could dispute Ariès' subsequent observation that, from the late eighteenth century onward, childhood increasingly became an object of concern. The progress of childhood, from non-existence or relative obscurity to cultural obsession, was largely effected by means of an ongoing project of knowledge-production leading to the very particular ways in which we know and relate to children in the present.

The dominant concept of childhood in the contemporary world is a scientific concept. The "depth" knowledge about children postulates that children develop, that this development takes them through a series of stages which may be scientifically mapped, and that in each stage they have needs that must be appropriately met to avoid long-term undesirable effects.[2] Since their inception in the early nineteenth century, and with renewed assiduity and authority since the turn of the twentieth century—with the rise of the two powerful forces of Child Study and psychoanalysis—the sciences of childhood have proposed different models and specific contents to flesh out the notions of development, stages, needs, and long-term effects, but beyond (or underneath) countless surface debates, these very notions and this general view of the child are rarely questioned. The dominant knowledge of childhood purports to uphold an understanding of "the normal child" clearly distinguished from pathological childhoods in need of varying degrees of normalizing intervention, yet, paradoxically, in relation to the (adult) human standard it also conceives all children as somehow abnormal or pathological—not-yet-fully-human, not-yet-developed, adults-to-be. This is one of the reasons why, in the historical emergence and elaboration of this knowledge, "abnormal" or extraordinary children were often privileged as objects of knowledge presumed to reveal something about all children. Initially devised in the industrialized countries, the dominant concept of the child has been exported and lately enforced throughout the world by means of international child-aid programs. Written into the 1989 UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child, it now gives universal shape to the normal and desirable childhood.

For two-hundred years, children have been at the receiving end of a project of knowledge-production in which the positions of subject and object of knowledge (adult and child) are painstakingly distinguished and hierarchically fixed. The same type of positioning was once common in the dominant forms of knowledge about other kinds of marginalized and subordinate people (the primitive, woman, the homosexual, the madman) which are in the process of being contested, giving rise to political movements (like feminism) and academic disciplines (like gay and lesbian studies) that question definitions imposed from outside, and inaugurate collective spaces for self-definition. No major discourse, discipline, or political movement has yet surfaced in which the subject is the (self-defining, self-knowing) child. It seems that children, like the class of French, small peasants described by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, cannot represent themselves—at least in the present conditions of knowledge-production. Children who "know too much" (or try to represent themselves) risk losing their status as children in the eyes of adults. Public and academic thinking about childhood is a task monopolized by adults.

But who are the adults who think about and relate to children in contemporary societies? A striking historical correlation, of the formulation of a scientific understanding of childhood and of children's needs, was a narrowing of socially sanctioned relations between adults and children. Ever more exclusive and proprietary parent-child relations are complemented or, when parents are found wanting, supplanted by relations between children and professionals of childhood (educators, physicians, caregivers, social workers, psychologists, psychoanalysts). The tendency is towards allowing and accepting relations between children and adults only when they are based on shared blood (or, in more current parlance, shared genes) or on the adult's expertise. And a striking feature of the contemporary configuration of discourses on childhood is the lack of a sustained theoretical reflection on childhood, on the difference between children and adults, on how the state of being a child affects the experience of being human. Indeed, most philosophical or theoretical texts ignore childhood altogether. This silence perpetuates the two complementary assumptions that bolster the dominant view of the child: the disciplinary division of labour according to which childhood belongs exclusively to science and to specializations within the traditional disciplines, and the naturalization of childhood as a phenomenon outside or beyond theoretical inquiry.

The divide between children and adults, and the age, ritual, and cognitive boundaries a child must cross to be promoted to the state of adulthood,

are defined (and defended) by adults. Childhood is defined and existentially constituted as an object of knowledge while children are discursively excluded as subjects of knowledge. Since children do not represent themselves, since they do not have access to the means of knowledge-production, and since it is unthinkable, at least for us, that children might generate a publicly-recognized theoretical reflection on the category of childhood and the difference between children and adults in the same way as other theoretically-inclined members of minorities or marginalized groups have done or may do, thinking about childhood, like scientific research on children, must be done by adults.

Then we must wonder, what risks are entailed when the adult seizes the place of the subject in a discourse about the child? In modern Western societies, "the child" is a double figure: an object known by various disciplines and made to participate in social and cultural institutions, but also a pervasive image in the collective and individual adult imagination. Ever since Rousseau's pedagogical musings, and Blake's and Wordsworth's poetry, the image of the child has offered one of the most vigorous embodiments for adult attitudes, beliefs, and desires. "The child" stands for the prelapsarian (or pre-modern) vision of innocence, purity, and unity with nature. In turn, it encapsulates the modern idea (and lived experience) of the adult self as a self *within*, the product of a personal history.[3] In this sense—as the adult's lost past —childhood does achieve momentous theoretical significance, but only as a means to explain adult origins, to account for how we got to be who we are. The twentieth century's foremost theory of subjectivity, psychoanalysis, grants childhood a position of privilege. But childhood matters in psychoanalysis (and the theories and therapies that directly or indirectly evolved from it, excepting perhaps child analysis) as what has been forgotten or repressed and for this very reason affects the adult in the present and must be remembered, reconstructed, or recovered through the work of analysis. As its hermeneutic and therapeutic value rises, childhood recedes into the past or the timelessness of the unconscious, and the child in the present disappears. As the adult turns her attention inward to her needy inner child, she turns her eyes away from the child out there. In the present state of things, children do not represent themselves either discursively or politically. Adult attempts to represent "the child" run the risk of representing the adult once again, only in a different form: as the child I was, the child I desire because of a nostalgic attachment to my own lost past.

To move beyond the figures of the child as a defective adult (in perpetual preparation to become an adult) and the child within the adult (romanticized or demonized memories of childhood as the time of innocent happiness or of abuse and trauma), I advance the notion of the child

as other. Otherness is meant to signal both the other person's integrity and the distance between the other and myself—the distance separating us, and the distance that makes possible our meeting.[4] Neither object nor self-image, the other child would be a separate person with whom a meaningful, ethical relation may and ought to be established. And to explore the notion of the other child, I focus on (historical and imaginary) moments in which the adult is faced by a child who can be neither easily objectified (explained using the knowledge and categories we usually rely on in our dealings with children) nor easily assimilated (as a mirror of ourselves or an explanation of our origins), but remains indisputably different, unfamiliar, strange.

The stories of wild children tell of encounters between adults and strange children in unusual circumstances and of the responses the children elicited in the adults. It makes sense to examine these stories in the context of a critical engagement with childhood and otherness because wild children—children presumed to have been raised by animals or to have spent a long period in isolation from other human beings—are unquestionable figures of otherness, embodiments of radical difference confronting the adult subject of knowledge. Which is not to say that individual wild children have not been objectified or conflated with the adult self through various kinds of mechanisms and projections. Still, the encounter with the wild child as a figure for thought at least promises to bring to the fore the distance separating the adult and the child and the effort the adult must make to reduce it (and so to reduce the child's difference).

Wild children—Peter of Hanover, the wild girl of Songi, Victor of Aveyron, Kaspar Hauser, Amala and Kamala of Midnapore, Genie, the wild boy of Burundi, and many others—were located at the centre of concentric circles of concern, curiosity, and intervention: interpersonal, communal, social, transnational. They unfailingly attracted interest and attention, but the meanings they were given and the responses they evoked varied greatly. In general, the response to the wild child depends on the questions brought to bear at the moment of the encounter and the knowledge the adults in charge possess and/or seek. The character of the relation established between adult and wild child is marked by the adult's specific conception of who and what the child is. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, newly-discovered wild children were "received" by scientists and administrators as privileged objects of knowledge and intervention. In almost every case, the response to the wild child took the form of an attempt to transform—humanize, tame, civilize, normalize, educate, or cure—her or him. Something was always done with/to the child. The approaches used varied widely, from direct and unashamedly violent "taming" or training, to more "rational," non-violent, and medicalized

forms of education, treatment and rehabilitation. The changing response to the wild child intersects with the historical emergence and increasing refinement of medical and pedagogical technologies of intervention in all children's lives.

In the twentieth century, the wild child existed—in discourse, in adults' imaginations, and perhaps, in reality—mainly in two incarnations: the wolf child and the confined child. Each of these figures offered adults a vehicle for fantasy, projection and identification. The children reputedly reared by wolves and other wild animals in remote corners of the world (Kamala and Amala, John of Burundi) stand at maximum spatial, cultural, and conceptual distance from the civilized adult, and, in their likeness to animals, appear to be most estranged from the human condition. The confined children (Genie) are not found "far away" or "out there," in some exotic wilderness, but right here in our midst, in a human-made environment (dungeon, attic, locked room), and to this minimum spatial distance (from us) corresponds a maximum of possibilities for psychological investment. Unintelligible, almost unthinkable, the wolf child is not a figure with whom we can easily identify, but for that very reason it exerts a special kind of pull on us: the fascination of the exotic, the obscure, the primitive, the most radically other. In contrast, the confined child presents us with no mystery, because her or his confined life is one of utmost control and immobility. The confined child sitting alone in a dungeon or locked room, all day, day after day, is an image that troubles us, but which we have no trouble imagining. And, we have been told, the confined child is in essence an abused child, like, perhaps, most (or all) of us; it lives in us and discloses our truth, our (past) selves, our inner children.[5]

There is also a third figure, a third incarnation of the wild child in the twentieth century: the "free" wild child, the wild child who remains free. It is, for the most part, a creature of our imagination and desire—the desire to leave the wild child alone, to celebrate and preserve the wild child as wild child.

2. The Free Wild Child

> Go run the ring, run it thin with trespass:
> Until we forgive
> What we fetter to free ourselves.
> O wild child I see you restless in the thorn
> And in the burning sky.
>
> Is this my link?
> Have I shortened the leash?
> Must I lock your eyes onto the mirror
> Of my fear, my fear for them...?
> Where is the chain I broke,
> Are my arms wrapped by death?
>
> —**J. Fairfax**, "The other child?"

As an example of what wild children allow us to think and do, let me tell you the only story of a free wild child to date. In 1960, Jean-Claude Auger, a poet, painter, solitary traveller, and explorer, found a boy living with a herd of gazelles in the Tiris, then part of the Spanish Sahara. Unlike all earlier (and later) discoverers of wild children, Auger did not capture the boy, but rather observed him in his "natural environment" for almost a month. Théodore Monod, of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire at Dakar, pressed Auger to make public the details, at first unsuccessfully. In Auger's reticence Monod sensed an attempt to resist the scientific exploitation of the wild child: "I understand very well that the appetite for precision of 'observers' such as ourselves irritates you a bit, because you would be perfectly satisfied with 'the poetic aura' of things."[6] But the publication of Lucien Malson's *Les Enfants sauvages* in 1964, and the release of Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage* in 1970, renewed interest in wild children, and in 1971, Auger's full account of his encounter with the gazelle boy appeared under his other name, Jean-Claude Armen.[7]

Armen marks his unexpected encounter as an "extraordinary experience...the most moving to have befallen me in the course of five years of travelling round the earth" (17). His first sighting of the boy is a "vision" of an "unknown, fabulous creature in a world apart" (28). The thought of capturing him—to transform him into something like what he (Armen) was—does not cross Armen's mind. He is overwhelmed by the wild boy's presence, resolved to extricate the spiritual meaning of his existence. Although this account contains elements common to most accounts of

wild children (a description of the boy, observations on his life and behaviour, conjectures about his origin, and a view of his overall condition), in crucial ways Armen's response to the boy is peculiar. He does not cover up the "animal" aspects of the boy's life and behaviour, yet for Armen this "animality" is neither disgusting nor disturbing. In part, he claims, this is because of the range of his experience as an explorer of remote lands and non-Western cultures. Besides, he is enthralled by what he perceives as the gazelle boy's perfect harmony with the herd, with nature, with the universal order of things. During the weeks he spends with the herd, Armen tries diverse methods to make contact with the boy: by means of the gaze, by playing a few notes on a simple flute, which after a few days catch the boy's attention, by imitating the gazelles' (and the gazelle boy's) sniffing and licking, which, he guesses, is "some kind of code signifying acknowledgment, contact, and almost recognition" (32). Through this last method—through his own adoption of gazelle behaviour—Armen reaches "the transparency and plenitude of a new state, of a rare 'communication,'" in what is "a painful moment of extreme intensity . . . an instant of deadlock violence" of the kind that "confers meaning and value on an existence" (35). His provisions long gone, and having become "a shadow of myself, surviving only by my passion for the child and his gazelles," Armen reluctantly leaves "this life which I have been living at the boundaries of unreality" (75, 78). Upon his return to Europe he decides to conceal the boy's precise whereabouts, "for what was at stake was the safety of a creature still too fragile to defend himself against the enterprises of men, well-intentioned or otherwise" (80). In spite of Armen's precautions, American officers of the NATO base of Villa Cisneros, in the Rio de Oro, tried to capture the gazelle boy in 1966 and in 1970. If they had succeeded, Armen says, "every American in deepest Texas would have seen the child on his little screen, stuffed with tranquillizers and, on his arm, a Hollywood-style native girl darkened with sun-tan, between advertisements for hot dogs and biological washing-powders" (94).

The figure of the free wild child points to a new attitude to the wild child in general. No longer miserable, brutal, and essentially inhuman (deprived of the essential characteristics of humanity), the free wild child lives in equilibrium with the environment. The desire to leave the wild child alone marks a change in the evaluation of the wild child's wild life, and this change may be seen as the obverse of the Western, civilized adult's own dissatisfaction with civilization and yearning for a different kind of life—a fuller, more meaningful existence. The free wild child thus offers a new channel for the expression of the anti-civilization sentiments which have been a strong undercurrent in the West since at least the industrial revolution. Armen, writing when the nineteen-sixties counterculture was still on

the rise, remarks that it would be "senseless" to want to transform the gazelle boy into "a candidate for our producer-consumer civilization," precisely at the time "when an increasingly large proportion of the younger generation is rejecting the 'values' of our Western civilization" (93). The free wild child is inextricable from the notion that, as Freud warned us, civilization involves constraint, and this constraint is the source of our discontent. Still, the realization that the "uncivilized" may be left to exist as such, without danger to the civilized subject, is tied, on the one hand, to the political and philosophical critiques of imperialism and colonialism (as the project to impose civilization on the other for our own benefit), and on the other hand, to the simple fact that we are no longer striving to achieve civilization (to differentiate ourselves from the other on the basis of our advanced civilization), but are for better or worse completely in it —whether we want it or not. From this position, it becomes easier to identify with the wild child as the embodiment of the self's desire.

Armen argues that knowledge of, and through, the wild child can only be obtained by living with the wild child in his or her own environment. Moreover, he declares that the kind of knowledge held by the wild child is not of the kind that interests scientists but rather of a spiritual revelation. The free wild child is the civilized adult's guide away from, or beyond, civilization: "in my innermost self, the wild child whom I discovered by chance has unexpectedly become, as it were, the point of convergence of my long and obscure 'quest' for fulfillment across five continents" (95). Armen not only wants to relate to the gazelle boy, but endeavours to become like the wild child. In this reworked form, the encounter with the wild child is a transformative experience for the subject. I said before that the gazelle boy of the Sahara Desert is the only free wild child to date, and this is not entirely true. The last few years have seen a proliferation of free wild children in literature and film. Think for instance of the silent wild boy in David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life*, who encounters Ovid in exile, becomes the poet's guide and eventually allows him to experience his own metamorphosis; or the wild woman played by Jodie Foster in Michael Apted's *Nell*, who pleads in court to remain free and untransformed—and wins. In John Fairfax's poem cycle *Wild Children*, the wild child is the speaker. Captured, the wild child reclaims his or her identification with animals: "I found them. / They are mine, I am theirs."[8] Tamed, trained, civilized, the wild child yearns for freedom: "They come to me with keys / In their voice, with chains / For hands, with thorn in their eyes. / They sound me a name.... / O I cannot recall my forest."[9]

To a great extent the figure of the free wild child emerges in reaction to the appropriation of wild children by the scientific establishment and for scientific knowledge—the conviction that scientists should study the wild

child, transform the wild child, reveal the wild child's secrets and in so doing advance our knowledge of the normal child (and our strategies to normalize children). But the figure of the free wild child has more troubling connotations as well. Armen claims that one of the reasons for his opposition to the gazelle boy's capture is the "established fact" that children who have spent several years in the wild are not "readaptable" (93). The desire to leave the wild child alone thus carries an implicit or explicit admission of our own limitations: our attempts to "rescue" the wild child have failed. The fate of most wild children—early deaths, lack of recovery, visible unhappiness—shakes our belief in our individual and social capacity to respond to the child's needs, to restore and console a lost, abandoned, or suffering child. Rather than a well-overdue recognition of the child's otherness, the desire to leave the child alone may be a silent confession of the adult's inability or unwillingness to commit fully to the other child who demands from the adult not normalizing, but meaningful and ethical interventions.

Notes

1 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. R. Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962).

2 I am borrowing the concept of "depth knowledge" from Ian Hacking, who in turn derives it from Foucault's *savoir* and *connaissance*; see Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

3 See Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

4 My understanding of 'otherness' is indebted to the philosophical anthropology of Buber, Bakhtin and Todorov, who in their work privilege the (dialogical) *relation* between self and other.

5 The recent appropriation of wild children for the discourse of sexual abuse is most evident in Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's *Lost Prince: The Unsolved Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

6 Jean-Claude Auger, "Un Enfant-gazelle au Sahara Occidental" (*Notes africaines* 98, April 1963), 60 n. 2.

7 Lucien Malson, *Les Enfants sauvages: Mythe et réalité* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1964) and Jean-Claude Armen, *L'Enfant sauvage du Grand Désert: Découverte d'un enfant-gazelle observé dans son milieu naturel* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1971). The English version (from which I quote) is *Gazelle-Boy: A Child Brought Up by Gazelles in the Sahara Desert*, trans. S. Hardman (London: Bodley Head, 1974).

8 "Ostrich boy," in John Fairfax, *Wild Children* (Hermitage, Newbury: Phoenix, 1985), 31.

9 "The wild boy is taught," 40.