CHILDREN IN THE FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

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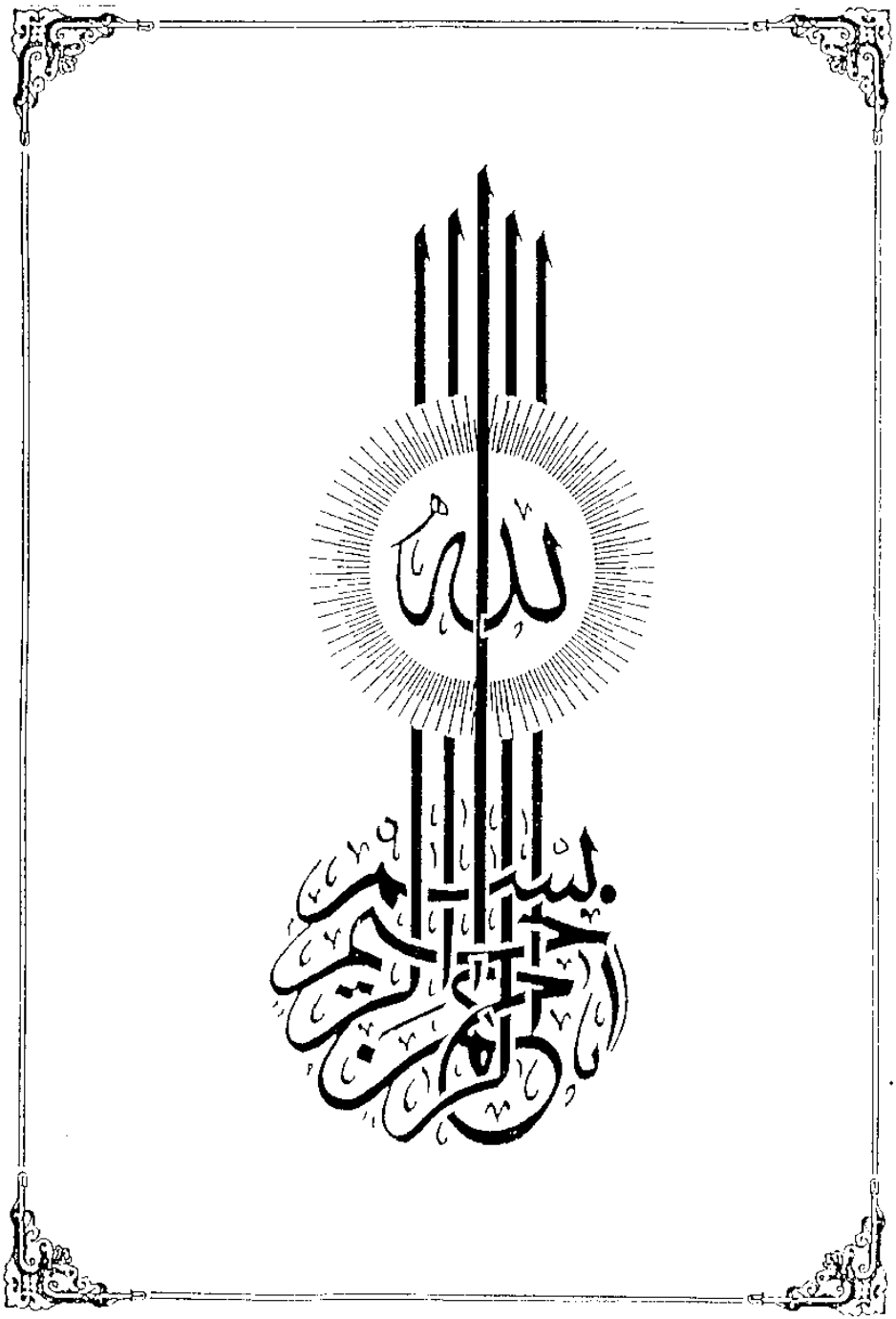

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Until the last decades of the eighteenth century the child did not exist as an important and continuous theme in English literature. Childhood as a major theme came with the generation of Blake and Wordsworth. There were of course children in English literature before the Romantics, but the child was the occasion of a passing reference; at the most a subsidiary element in an adult world. Childhood was a period rapidly passed over and did not provide the creative writer with a major theme.

The appearance of the child "was indeed simultaneous with the changes in sensibility and thought which came with the end of the eighteenth century".(1) The social and political problems arising from the French and Industrial Revolutions affected the security and peace of the eighteenth century. Poets like William Blake (1757-1827) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), in a time of political revolution and industrialization, imaged the child as a symbol of innocence in a materialistic world. As Peter Coveney indicates

> "In a world given increasingly to utilitarian values and the Machine, the child could become the symbol of Imagination and Sensibility, a symbol of Nature set against the forces abroad in society actively de-naturing humanity. Through the child could be expressed the artist's awareness of human Innocence against the cumulative pressures of social Experience....In childhood lay the perfect image of insecurity and isolation, fear and bewilderment and vulnerability".(2)

With Blake's The Chimney Sweep and Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations

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(1) Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature, (London 1957), p.ix.
(2) Ibid., p.xi.

of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood the reader is confronted with something essentially new, the phenomenon of major poets expressing something they considered of great significance through the image of the child and within the course of a few decades "the child emerged from comparative unimportance to become the focus of an unprecedented literary interest, and in time, the central figure of an increasingly significant proportion of English literature."(1) The child lies at the heart of Dombey and Son (1847), The Prelude (1850), and Huckleberry Finn (1884) - works, which in any evaluation, have their undeniable significance as serious adult art. Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens and Mark Twain were powerful forces. The importance is that for them the child became a symbol of the greatest significance for the subjective investigation of the Self, and an expression of their protest against the "experience" of society.

In the innocent quality of childhood and the subsequent loss of innocence Blake dramatized his theme of the coexitence of good and evil in man. He recognized the reality of evil in the child's as well as the adult's world. In The Songs of Innocence (1789) Blake writes of "Infant Joy" and in Songs of Experience (1794) he writes of "Infant Sorrow". In many of The Songs of Innocence children are portrayed with a new vision. The little chimney sweeper is unique in that he is realistically presented and has an individual point of view. We recognize in him a particular child reacting to a particular environment; he is a symbol of innocence in the midst of social evil:

"When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry ''weep! 'weep!' 'weep'
So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep."(2)

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(1) Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p.ix.
(2) Selected Poems of W. Blake, (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), The Chimney Sweeper, p.46.

Here the wickedness of the adult world is rendered through the sensibilities of the child. It is this humane sensibility which lies behind the indignation of The Chimney Sweeper: "Because I was happy upon the heath...They clothed me in the clothes of death".(1) Blake decries the indifference of the Church to the sufferings of little children. He attacks the inhumanity of this society and especially its inhumanity to children. The charity-children going to their Divine Service on Holy Thursday evoke Blake's indignation towards society:

"Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduc'd to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?...

And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are fill'd with thorns:
It is eternal winter there."(2)

The themes of Innocence are the celebration of childhood's joy in Nature and the child's sympathy for all created things. The Shepherd, The Laughing Song, Spring, The Nurse's Song all echo this joy of the child in Nature. A Dream makes this point clear. A child lying on the grass sees a wondering ant; no barrier in the child's consciousness lie between himself and the ant. The ant "troubled... and forlorn", cries for its lost children, and the child shows his compassion:

"Pitying, I dropped a tear:
But I saw a glow-worm near
Who replied: What wailing wight
Calls the watchman of the night?

I am set to light the ground,
While the beetle goes his round:
Follow now the beatle's hum;
Little wanderer, hie thee home."(3)

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(1) Selected Poems of W. Blake, p.69.
(2) Ibid., p.72.
(3) Ibid., p.50.

Both the Songs of Innocence and Experience are concerned with education, with the nature of the child and the corruption he is exposed to by the agents of society. The child's Innocence once established, Blake progresses into the adult world of Experience. Innocence in Blake had been a symbol of rich definition, containing within it Blake's positive assertion of "Life". Experience for the poet was the power of society to negate the enjoyment of the soul's Innocence. With the songs of Experience, the reader is in a different world. The pastorol gives place to the urban. Experience lives among the "charter'd streets" of London. London is perhaps the most vehement outcry that any city or society has had levelled against it. He ended his Songs of Experience with The Schoolboy which gives the case against education:

"I love to rise in a summer morn
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.
Oh!! what sweet company!

But to go to school in a summer morn
O! it drives all joy away;
Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day
In sighing and dismay...

How can the bird that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing?

O! father and mother, if buds are nipped
And blossoms blown away...

How shall the summer arise in joy,
Or the summer fruits appear?"(1)

"The bird that is born for joy" is the child of Blake's Songs of Innocence; his "cage" the eighteenth century England in The Songs of Experience.

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(1) Selected Poems of W. Blake, p.66.

For William Wordsworth the child was the basis of a whole philosophy of human nature. The theme of childhood was so much a part of his philosophy that it cannot be separated from his vision of life. For Wordsworth childhood is a time of pure joy. The Prelude (1850), and Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood (1807), indicate the poet's reluctance to move to the next stage of development. Reference with Wordsworth is always to his own childhood and adolescent experience. In The Prelude he returns to:

> "Those recollected hours that have the charm
> of visionary things...that throw back our life
> And almost make our Infancy itself
> A visible scene, on which the sun is shining."(1)

He gives details of his infancy, but the reference is always general and towards growth and development, towards "passions which build up our human soul".(2) For Wordsworth, childhood was the "seed-time" of the "soul".(3)

> "He saw the development of the human mind as organic through infancy and youth to maturity. The relation of the Child to Nature was fundamental to his concept of the growth of the moral personality. The child was in fact an essential part of the "wisdom" he sought to convey."(4)

Tintern Abbey shows what nature had been to him in adolescence:

> "....when like a roe
> I bounded over the mountains.... For nature then...
> To me was all in all."(5)

This spontaneous response to nature passes with maturity. But for the

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(1) Amin Rouphail, ed. Nineteenth Century Poetry, (Cairo 1974), p. 63.
(2) Ibid., p.66.
(3) Ibid., p.63.
(4) As quoted by Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p. 30.
(5) Oscar William, ed. The Mentor Book of Major British Poets, (London 1963), p.75-6.

"loss", there is "abundant recompense":

> "...For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often times
> The still sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime..."(1)

His "concern with his own childhood became the means of establishing general truths about the whole nature of Man".(2)

In 1899, James Fotheringham, in his study of The Prelude; emphasized Wordsworth's significance to the nineteenth century interest in the child:

> "It is owing to the movement he so well interpreted, and in good part owing to him, that we have studied the child-nature so much, and so carefully, as we have lately been doing."(3)

He had conditioned the belief in the natural goodness of childhood, the moral value of the simple life and the healing powers of nature. Michael, a study of the healing power of nature, is a moving poem which also shows the contrast between the innocent country and the wicked city. It is noteworthy that the loss of innocence and death are frequently associated in Wordsworth's poetry. Michael's son goes off to the city (Wordsworth's correlative for loss of innocence) and dies there. The boy in There was a Boy was "taken from his mates and died in childhood, ere he was full twelve years old". It is as though the end of childhood is a kind of extinction for the poet. He portrayed childhood as the traditional ideal of innocence and purity; for him it was a symbol for the ideal human condition.

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(1) Oscar William, ed. The Mentor Book of Major British Poets, (London 1963), p.76.
(2) Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p.31.
(3) Ibid., p.30.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, then, the symbol of the romantic child was established; and it was, primarily a poetic symbol. This romantic view of the child in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century affected the presentation of children in the literature that followed, particularly in the novel which became the dominant genre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Oliver Twist (1838), Jane Eyre (1947), Wuthering Heights (1847), and Dombey and Son (1947) represent a revolution in the novel. It was not only a revolution within the novel itself, however; but a revolution as between poetry and prose. The novel, as a vehicle for psychological analysis rather than the recounting of events, became the major literary form in the mid-nineteenth century; the sphere of poetry became more and more peripheral. Peter Coveney states that:

> "In this central transference towards prose, the flow carried within itself the characteristics of the romantic sensibility - the self awareness, the heightened sense of individual personality, the social protest, and too, the increased awareness of the child, as a symbol of innocence and life of the imagination, as an expression of nostalgia, insecurity, and introspective self-pity."(1)

Other infleunces helped determine what forms the theme of childhood in literature would take. In fact, one of the great strengths of the nineteenth century fiction was its close concern with society. The advance of the nineteenth century brought more social and political problems; materialism and the desire for progress created an atmosphere or tension that artists felt and reflected. Some novelists, touched by the child victims of industrialization and drawing on their own feelings of childhood experiences, criticized those disturbing aspects of society. "The child," Peter Coveney remarks, "could serve as a symbol of the artist's dissatisfaction with society which was in process of such harsh development about

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(1) Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p.50.

him."(1) The artist could voice his anxieties and project his fears through the theme of childhood. The cry of children became the cry of the artist seeking security in an unstable world.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is, of course, the focus for any study of the child in the nineteenth century novel. Through Dickens who used the child victim to voice his protest against society, the romantic child entered into the Victorian novel.

Dickens identified his own misery as a child with the general miseries of children in early Victorian England. His own childhood and the fate of so many children of his time became the symbol of the crimes inflicted by a harsh society upon its victims, and led to his interest in social reform and particularly in the reform of the condition of the child. From that awareness he conveyed the struggle of innocence and evil, which became the pivot of his mature art. The child became for him the symbol of sensitive feeling anywhere in a society pursuing material progress. It is within the context of this criticism that the child in Dickens is to be considered. Dicken's concern for the children of the poor is shown from his speech given on behalf of the Children's Hospital in Great Ormond Street in February, 1858:

> "But ladies and gentlemen, the spoilt children whom I must show you are the spoilt children of the poor in this great city, the children who are, every year, for ever and ever irrevocably spoilt out of this breathing life of ours by tens of thousands....I shall only ask you to observe how weak they are, and how like death they are.... This is the pathetic case which I have to put to you...on behalf of the thousands of children who live half developed, recked with preventible pain, shorn of their natural capacity for health and enjoyment. If these innocent creatures cannot move you for themselves, how can I possibly hope to move you in their name."(2)

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(1) eter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p.ix.
(2) As quoted by Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey, p.83.

Dickens' Oliver Twist (1838) was one of the first novels in the English language which had a child as a central character. The child also appears in Dombey and Son (1847), David Copperfield (1850), and Hard Times (1854). Oliver Twist is the prototype of the passive child, the powerless pawn of forces beyond his control, who was to dominate Dicken's novels of social protest. The novel is impressive not only because of its social commentary and satire on the Poor Law of 1884 but because of the remarkable account it gives of the world seen through the eyes of a child. At the coffin maker's shop, Oliver is given a bed beneath the counter: "He was alone in a strange place... The boy had no friends to care for, or to care for him."(1) Desperate, he runs away. The world of loneliness opens before him. Creeping "close under a hayrick" he listens to the wind which "mourned dismally over the empty fields; and he was cold and hungry, and more alone than he had ever felt before".(2) Here the insistence is on helplessness and isolation. When the child leaves the baby farm, to go into the workhouse proper, he misses "the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time."(3)

With Oliver lying wounded and deser d by Sikes, the note of isolation is clear:

> " The air grew colder, as day came slowly on and the mist rolled along the ground like a dense cloud of smoke...the damp breath of an unwholesome wind went languidly by, with a hollow moaning. Still, Oliver lay motionless and insensible on the spot where Sikes had left him."(4)

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(1) Oliver Twist, (Penguin Books, 19), ch.5, p.75.
(2) Ibid., ch.8, p.98.
(3) Ibid., ch.2, p.53.
(4) Ibid., ch.28, p.257.

This is the hard life of the child who had cried out to Bumble on his way to the undertaker's:

> "'No, no sir! sobbed Oliver, clinging to the hand which held the weel-known cane, 'no, no sir, I will be good indeed; indeed, indeed, I will sir! I am a very little boy, sir; and it is-so-so!
> "So what?" enquired Bumble in amazement.
> "So lonely, sir! So very lonely! cried the child."(1)

This is the world of Oliver Twist which is essentially the world of the Dickens child.

With Dombey and Son (1847), the reader is confronted with the death of a child. Dickens gives the account of the psychic murder of a son by his father. Dombey and Son is an account of the pursuit of wealth and power and the consequent denial of love and feeling by the pursuer in the lives of his children. Obsessed by his ambitions to forward the fortunes of his business, Dombey withdraws from his children the normal affection of a father. He destroys his son and would have destroyed his daughter, had not his obsession been broken through by his moral and financial ruin. He is saved by opening his feelings to receive the affection of his daughter. The novel is contained within the implicit irony of the title, that in the words of Miss Tox, "Dombey and Son is a daughter after all".

The account of Paul Dombey's destruction is one of the greatest imaginative triumphs of English fiction. It is no account this time of a workhouse orphan, or an unwanted child, but rather the favoured son of a prosperous merchant. The nurse Polly Toodles whom Dombey recruits to take charge of the motherless Paul, and her family, represent the world of humanity and feeling. With them, in alliance is the orphan Walter Gray who works in Dombey's office. Throughout Walter is contrasted with Paul as the creation of a warm affectionate world from which Paul himself is excluded. Walter is the "cheerful-looking, merry boy, fresh with running home in the

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(1) Oliver Twist., ch.4, p.73.

rain; fair-faced, bright-eyed, and curly-haired." The two world are confronted. But the Dombey world is wonderfully given in terms of imagery:

> "It was a corner-house, with great wide areas containing cellars frawned upon by barrel windows. It was a house of dismal state, with a circular back to it, containing a whole suit of drawing rooms, looking upon a gravelled yard, where two gaint trees with blackened trunks and branches, rattled rather than rustled, their leaves were so smoke-dried."
>
> "It was as blank a house inside as outside. Every chandelier or lustre, muffled in Holland, looked like a monstrous tear depending from the ceiling's eye."(1)

The sterility of the "two gaint trees" rattling through "smoke-dried" leaves is instinct in the book. Paul himself withers like a flower denied the nourishment of sunlight.

Dombey's ruin is his redemption for he is at last aware of his crime. There is a reconciliation between father and daughter:

> "Autumn days are shining, and on the sea-beach there are often a young lady, and a white-haired gentleman. With them, or near them, are two children; boy and girl... The white-haired gentleman walks with th little boy...helps him in his play. Sometimes when the child is sitting by his side and looks up in his face, asking him questions, he takes the tiny hand in his, and holding it, forgets to answer. Then the child says: 'What Grandpapa, am I so like my poor little uncle again?'
> 'Yes, Paul; but he was weak and you are very strong.'
> 'Oh, yes, I am very strong.'
> And he lay on a little bed beside the sea, and you can run about.'
> And so they range away again busily, for the white-haired gentleman likes best to see the child free and stirring."(2)

Dombey's atonement is made. The crime against Paul is expiated in the "free and stirring' child.

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(1) Dombey and Son, ch.3, p.19.
(2) Ibid., ch.LXII, p.741.