

THE CHILDHOOD OF MANKIND

The childhood of humanity, the human race in its infancy: while this expression was in common use, there was probably no ground for seeking out the implementation of real symbols on each occasion on which it was used. Its very success having made it commonplace, a metaphor becomes a convenient and communal way of speaking which does not necessarily correspond to a way of thinking. But as soon as the formula seems to be out of date, it ceases retrospectively by this fact, to be commonplace. Or to be more exact, a triteness to which the common run of thought no longer adheres, begins in itself to pose a question: if the end of a stereotype is not a loss for scholarship, it is a spur to reflection. What a modification must take place in our rational apprehension of ourselves, what an alteration of the status, content and function of the ideas of humanity and of childhood, in order that the metaphor "the childhood of humanity" should in future have no explanatory power, and that having ceased to enlighten or to prove, it should have ceased to appear natural, in order to become obsolete. Since the image of the childhood of humanity was commonplace, what concatenation of evidence was the basis for this commonplaceness? What does the recourse to images of childhood mean, as related to the definitive confines of

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humanity? And what is the conception of human "becoming" which is backed up by the temporal and qualitative buttresses of a childhood?

A multitude of clues scattered over diverse writers, found in different perspectives, uses of the same current idiom which are sometimes marginal, sometimes decisive, an extreme density of usage coupled with such a disparity of usage, all this demands a style of analysis which takes both the unity and the disparity of a commonplace into account. It is not a matter of drawing up an inventory of this metaphor according to the repertoire of cases where it can be substantiated in any particular period or area (here, in France, and in Germany in the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th). A lexicological inquiry of this kind would be as empty as it would be ill-defined. Exhaustiveness in this field could only be achieved by the employment of means quite out of proportion to the importance of the result, if it could be achieved at all. Indeed, the use of an image which is manifest in a culture is indicative of its success without always being significant: once it has become commonplace, one has recourse to it without thinking. In order to distinguish active recourse to a metaphor from peripheral and trite usages which are connected with it, one would try to distinguish its role in rational thought. Where construction has no part to play, this simply reveals the vulgarisation of the metaphor. Where it has an argumentative function, or where the idea being developed rests on it, drawing its conclusion or its basis from it, the expression is truly connected with a conceptual representation. It is possible to distinguish the function of a metaphor and its place in the line of argument; therefore it is possible to isolate the points through which it has the task of supporting the argument. As the totality of arguments related to the metaphor of the human race, in its childhood is not homogeneous, there is no ground for an attempt to make a synthesis of representations of the childhood of humanity, toning down discrepancies in favour of coherence and parallelism. On the contrary: it is in the explosion of analysis that the usages of this metaphor will best appear, and likewise the complex implications of its success. So I will concentrate, therefore, on the establishment of a differential table of argumentation, rather a synthesis of examples.

THE STATUS OF THE OTHER

The childhood of humanity is framed by the most complete metaphor of the ages of man. It finds a place in a wide current of logical identification which, for elucidation, tends to compare the course of the history of humankind with the course of the life of one individual subject. In its different periods, or its successive phases, this great living thing goes through stages of development which are compared with ages. This metaphoric scheme dominates particularly from the 18th, century.¹

It postulates a sort of parallel between this unique man which the human race constitutes, and the ages of individual life; and this parallel connection stretches in both directions. Sometimes the history of mankind and all the changes of all kinds which make it up come forward and explain themselves in terms appropriate to individual development, as a sort of maturation, that is to say as an internal metamorphosis whose continuity may be staked out by indicators: the ages are coherent states although they are transitory, and they allow of understanding and of the ordaining of a psychological and logical becoming. Sometimes on the other hand, individual history is understood to be a recapitulation of the collective history of the race, and it is not unimportant to the psychological and pedagogical view of the individual's development to ask each one to take his turn at reviewing and recapitulating the whole of the species' past. Thus the image of the ages of humanity is useful to itself, as it were, as a means of reference and duplication. The idea of the individual life, which, at the outset, provides the explanatory scheme, finds itself affected and, as it were, demoted by it. There is, in some way, a potentialisation of pasts, which are both individual and collective: and in the same way as humanity reproduces man, man repeats humanity.

Thus the ages are indications of coherent units, which are qualitatively distinguishable one from another, and yet connected in their succession, like the different stages in single path. The ages of humanity are about three or four in number: childhood, youth, maturity, old age. Taking this basis, the status of modern

¹ Cf. H. Gouhier, *La jeunesse d'Auguste Comte et la formation du positivisme*, Paris, 1936, Vol. II, p. 51-52.

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Europeanism becomes the object of a fundamental discussion: is it the flowering of rational maturity, and the end of the mistakes and falterings of youth? Is it the high point of a process which it justifies as it transcends it? Or rather, in relation to a liveliness and primitive spontaneity which are lost forever, is it not rather that age of disenchantment which is incapable of recognising other aspects of grandeur, and which contemptuously reproaches the other centuries for not having its own wrinkles. In reply to the intellectualist perspective of the Age of Enlightenment, Herder starts a different debate from the trial intended by Rousseau, who, on this point, does not bring the scheme of the ages of man into play; according to Herder, the status of maturity is implicated in that of modernity. What does the succession of the ages, both historic and psychological, mean? What is the relationship between today, and its past? The first moment, the already oriented origin, that which is qualitatively initial, the time of childhood, which is always past but never annihilated, seems thus to be the most decisive age for our sense of actuality.

It is here that the metaphor is an avowal. In the same way as childhood is to the adult man that other person that we fully know we have been, but in whom we do not recognise ourselves, all the preliminary aspects of modern humanity were, in the 18th century, considered as a childhood. The semi-conjectural, semi-concrete traces of the past, which history both hides and reveals, and also those faces which are alien to our sphere of civilisation which exist at the same time as us, and yet are not contemporary with us, and essentially perceived as non-contemporary; all this periphery which encircles our identity questions it by its silent presence; it is sporadic, multiple, unified only when we look at it, and consistent to our questioning alone. And this periphery which sends us back into ourselves and reflects us, as the only questioner, is interned, like childhood. Thus humanity in 18th century Europe was able to integrate its own distance, and in a complex qualitative space, where the "almost" was the mirror to the "same," could meditate upon the otherness of the modes of human beings. To see strangeness as a kind of childhood is to bind it to oneself as an obscure but authorised source of present purity, as a decisive stage which has been long passed, as something radically other, which will always be transparent, committed forever to the deep, surprising and clear, both distant and close

at the same time, a reflection which is constantly distorted, and yet which is in possession of a secret about our identity in spite of dissemblance.

In the 18th century, the accent was placed first of all upon similitude: the beginnings of the human race, and its first fundamental steps, can be traced back in ourselves beyond all historical palimpsests. Since we are essentially the same, a recourse to ourselves in psychological terms will give us the simple and incontestable key to the lost world of our origins. If that world is lost in its history, it is permanent in its essence; so that evidence and analysis allow us, judging by ourselves, to know what the others did, insofar as they were others. From this we may know, or deduce, with axiomatic certainty: ultimately, in this perspective, the human spirit has never ceased to coincide perfectly with itself. However, since there is history, there must needs be alteration and functions of the alteration; it must be that time should be a process and not a simple palimpsest, and that the modifications which it imposes one on another should have a pattern and a meaning. This is what the perspective of the ages contributes: if the origins are a childhood, then our present situation bears a position relative to it of maturity, ambiguous and contested though it may be. Our position is what childhood prepared us for, or else one in which we are forever stripped of childhood. In both cases, in order to recover the childhood of the human spirit, it is no longer enough to look directly within oneself in order to read a naked account of elementary things; it is necessary to compare the first steps of the species with the first steps of the individual, and to understand the nature of the past and of human barriers in the light of infant psychology. But in this alignment, concrete psychological infancy, which may be studied, is nothing but a pretext and a prop of rhetoric. The determining element is the decisive value apportioned to the first steps and primary inflexions. One refers to commonplaces of child psychology to testify that the beginnings of human intellect, of human religion or society, whether in the most ancient manifestations to be classed as history, or in the most elementary ones to be classed as ethnology, did certainly possess those characteristics with which speculation would have endowed them, since even today they have childish characters; and since by implication the whole of childhood, the whole of the category

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of childhood, represents a unity. And to go more deeply, one should insist on childhood as a difference: as if there existed, independent of time, a mental category of childhood, which was stable in itself but radically different from ours. Romanticism, therefore, insists upon the otherness of childhoods; they are everything that we have lost, that which any motion of reflection extinguishes, artlessness, grace, thoughtlessness. We may rediscover them, but we may not relive them. The experience of them is only accessible to us through the nostalgia of remembrance. The 18th century retains the identity of essence and the direct similarity of the powerful and ambiguous link which connects European maturity with primitive infancies; romanticism retains the irreversible change. It also glamorises childhood through lamenting its distance. But there again it is a matter of an arbitrary childhood, a purely speculative one, which is invoked as a reference variously to the function of the point under question.

The idea struggling for expression, essentially, by means of the topic of childhood, is, at the same time as being a vision of individual destiny through its intellectual and affective components, and a philosophy of history concerned with connecting the successive order of the periods with their quantitative individuality, a meditation upon the same and the other, through the order of civilisations. The wide gulf between maturity and primitiveness is what the scheme of the succession of the ages aims to make negotiable. By degrees, it postulates, a great axis of modification will allow movement from that which is radically distant to that which is virtually identical; evolution, transition, transformation have all taken place; the unlike is integral with the like, of which it represents a necessary stage. And yet, the distance is maintained, it never appears so serious until one places the two terms which are qualified as ages against each-other. To place the most alien in relation to ourselves as a kind of childhood, does not bring it nearer to us without a certain ambiguity. Everything in childhood is not reassuring. Classical Europe does not allow childhood a clear and untroubled position. If that had been the case, of course, the primitive world could not be postulated as our childish world. Childhood is familiar, but more inevitable than evident. It is highly pejorative from an intellectualist point of

view; from a spiritualist point of view it is extolled, but as being beyond the adult. And in any case as an ideal of simplicity and purity, it is out of reach; as a prerational state, it is already state, it is already laid aside. The essence of discourse has no place there. Hence, to see the originating past as a kind of childhood, is to explain the adult other in terms of an even more serious otherness, since it is a more intimate one. It is to transform his exterior separateness, his exoticness, into an internal distance. He is like one moment of our existence, but a moment which in us is not ourselves. It would be easy, in other respects, to rest on familiar stereotypes, and to say that the first men were naturally violent, gullible, capricious emotive, according to the eternal idea of childhood: but this eternal image of childhood was in itself, up to the end of the 19th century and beyond, the opaque zone from which reasonable man knows and then forgets himself to have issued, the unthinkable threshold of the thinking individual. Certainly, by assimilating the primitive into the childish we gain a range of familiar analogies, and above all we gain a scale of unfolding whose different moments have a place and a function; but in fact, we liken an extrinsic strangeness of confrontation or impact to an otherness which is a constituent part of us, and rationally even more serious; we liken the unknown into the unknowable.

Thus the question of the relationship between primary infancy and rational maturity reinforces the question of the relationship between the primitive limits of humanity and European modernity which former is superimposed upon it. One and the same question winds about and seeks itself, whether it is a matter of the beginnings of history, of other forms of civilisation, or of that other life which precedes rational consciousness in all of us: what am I, an identity which must perforce embrace that which is unlike me? What does that other self which remains silent, and whose fugitive presence we attempt vainly to arrest in a search which is so engrossing only because we are both object and trophy, what can it teach us about ourselves? What can these fragments of otherness which, by such a long interrogative deviation we stir up in ourselves, reveal to us? Are they close, or are these beings in relation to which I must assess my position, distant? these children who, until Freud's time could not win the acknowledgement of reason, condemning in this way all human reason

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to irrationality about itself; whether similar or different, these men of long ago, putative or historical, and these men of no time that travel makes known to us, and whose careless eyes hold, for me, a secret forever about my own essence.

THE IMPOSSIBLE ADULT

The beginning, the initiation, the freshness of the first vision: all the images of starting have power over and above what they represent. That which inaugurates is decisive. The youth who sets out on his adventures on a clear spring morning, young in age, when the years is in its youth, and the day young too: such is Percival and the beginning of the stories of chivalry and initiation. Percival's naïveté is short-lived, as in the spring forest he sees, between the leaves still wet with dew, the sight of the ranks of men-at-arms, and the vision of another state of being, a desirable duty, glory, excitement, stir. That which is initial is only a starting point, and must be lost for anything to begin; and the beginning of the story already represents the end of primordial innocence. The dawn, and April, in the forest of history, are gone so quickly. It is hardly possible to tell, afterwards, when exactly they were left behind. From what follows, we have to assume a first step, but really there remains no memory of a first step. From this comes all the suppositions, reconstructions, and fictions. As soon as one postulates a state of previous naïveté, a kind of clean slate of history and civilisation, then one is committed to all the mythico-psychological arguments which describe that state, and all which afterwards ensued.

The men of the first moment have definitively warped everything which followed them up to the present, for the first minute divergence that they took, projected us directly to that inestimable distance we now occupy from the original state. These first men, whom one must assume to have existed, as such being present, arise in a mythical actuality which appears at the same time as they do. They, who are the origin, have none themselves they are there without reference to any natural genesis. A most indispensable prop in the argument, how are we to understand their real appearance? How concretely nonsensical this claim about the first

men is, protests de Bonald: they were not born as adults, as father and mother, nor did they discover a river of milk.²

They did not rise up out of the ground as adults from the dragon's teeth. And indeed the alternative appears fairly clear: either humanity arrives imperceptibly at the end of the natural line of descent, which is connected with the primate line, in which case it is not possible to isolate a primitive state of humanity which might constitute an empty stage between the higher animals and the culture already defined; or else humanity is directly placed by an act of God, in which case the first man is in Genesis and speculations upon natural law are given up in favour of the theology of history. And yet it comes about as if during the 18th century, up to its romantic fringe, that alternative was obscured by a different intuitive tide. The primitive or neutral adult is postulated first, and on that basis all the questions concerning origin are enumerated: the origin of words and language, the origin of societies, the origin of religions. Whether it be a neutral being or several neutral beings coexisting, how did they come by those determinations which, in retrospect, we know to be essential to history? What is the necessary minimum which they should be allowed in order to be able to take stock of the setting in motion of the developments which culminate in ourselves? A naturally sociable instinct? A facility for communication and the acquisition of signs? A psyche in which the imagination predominates, as in the romantic hypothesis; or, on the other hand, as in Rousseau's view, a lack of imagination? The hypotheses may be multiplied with the aim of economising on axioms, so that we may reconstitute the few simple and indispensable determinations for the fate of civilisation. But all the hypotheses take as a preliminary that neutral beings who carry the determinations exist: they are integrally men, but they are in no way civilised; adults from the start, but virgin of all experience.

The speculative prototype of the human race in its childhood is the novice adult. The evocative verbal notations of concrete childishness—cradle, leading-strings, hygiene—remain secondary in this respect; that which is infantile is recessive in comparison with that which is inaugural. The theme of primitive childhood

² De Bonald, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Migne, Paris, 1859, t. III, vol. 332-333.

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is connected with daydreams about the quite new adult. It is reminiscent of the awakening of Adam, and also of the emergence from Plato's cave into the first dazzlement which is due to the sun. One imagines primitive man (and savage man) in the position of an adult who for the first time sees the sun: to a new eye, how striking a spectacle! What a revelation of the sense of the divine! Carlyle, indeed, was to explain how the primitive nations possessed of the simplicity, candour, open-heartedness of a child, and therewithal the depth and strength of emotion of a mature man, did not fail to fall down in adoration of the sight of the rising sun.³

And are we, after all, so far from Tylor on this point? The decisive experience of the first men is made real to us, in the same form as we would find it in ourselves if we were able to imagine ourselves as being physically adult and mentally without a past. It would be all too easy to say in reply to this, that for the first men, as for all the others, the sunrise is a sight which has always been familiar. Nothing is less obvious, nothing is less natural, nothing comes less probably first than the affective cognitive and religious trauma of the advent of the sun. It is therefore very simple to isolate this fantastic psychology; it is less simple to understand its success and permanence. Here the essential is not that which is plausible, but that which is expressive. The essential is the will to recreate the adult's psychological naïveté as a rational fiction.

The working out of the story of the statue that comes to life is, in this respect, another aspect of the powerful dream about the awakening of a complete being which is still empty. An autochthonous being which arose fully armed, the statue automaton began an apprenticeship which was not that of childhood. As soon as it opened its eyes, as soon as its eyelids blinked and it perceived the garden, the statue which comes to life brings to bear upon the world around it a completely fresh eye; and it is this mythical naïveté of the first look that the psychology and the philosophy of history of the 18th century seek to recapture. The first view, or the first smell of a rose. When imagining a statue which would be roughly contemporary with

³ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Ashburton, London, 1885, t. III, p. 6, p. 88.

the Condillacian statue, Ch. Bonnet dwells on the preliminary moment when “The first scirrings take place in the statue; the essences circulate within... the senses are ready to play their part; but they are not yet in play.”⁴

Everything in this adult form is ready; the blood circulates, all physical powers can be instantly called upon, and the mental channels are in a state of perfect ignorant maturity. How can one ignore in this the speculative need for the adult’s complete innocence? The primary stage with which we are concerned is not the concrete education and formation of childhood, but a permanent elementary limpidity that one can reconstruct by discarding everything acquired.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Adam’s primitiveness does not fully coincide with childish purity, and that, among themselves, all forms of initiation are not superimposable. “Let us suppose that a child at its birth might be possessed of as much stature and strength as a grown man, that he might have sprung, as it were, fully armed from his mother’s breast, . . . this manchild would be a complete imbecile, an automaton, an immobile and almost insensible statue.”⁵ Perhaps *Emile* alone attempts to connect the genesis of truly natural man with the education of concrete man, the man who is born a child. Rousseau is respectful towards the internal maturation of the state of childhood in order to see the appearance of the first adult in all his universality, by virtue of the pedagogy of maturation without alteration. *Emile* is not to be determined, and thus limited, either in a psychological way—he will have not habits—or in a social way—he will be fitted for all stations. But what tension exists between the dimension of the individual’s metamorphosis in time, which all empirical circumstances tend to define and to close, and the normative dimension of flourishing naturalness which has been in no way made conspicuous: it is so fragile, and constantly at the mercy of one single false step. Rousseau often says that if one or another thing should occur only once, then all is lost. To frame a new adult, or at least to educate an unaltered one, would be a lost cause, justly, if *Emile*, the man, were not so

⁴ Ch. Bonnet, *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l’âme, Œuvres complètes*, Neuchâtel, 1772, t. VI, p. 11.

⁵ Rousseau, *Emile ou de l’éducation*, Paris, Garnier, 1964, p. 40.

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moved by his moral conscience. It is only in the behaviour which is dictated by moral conscience that empirical activity eventually becomes confused with basic universal activity.

By means of the complex example offered by *Emile*, one notes that it is not only socially and culturally unrealisable to arrive at the biographical fulfilment of the first adult; furthermore it is fundamentally impossible. The first adult is the one which we have established for ourselves in the first place, not the one whom we could reach. He himself has no childhood, for he is the incarnation of previousness. He is the very myth of the starting-point, and as such, his power lies in his unreality. That is why humanity in the childish stage seems at first to follow the lines of integral immaturity, through the creation of an impossible adult.

THE VALUES OF CHILDHOOD

Thus does it follow that the myth of the new adult should always be understood as that of humankind in its childhood? Does it follow that all the notions conveyed by the idea of collective childhood should be enclosed in that kind of "primitive scene," in that fictitious and yet revealing print, that tableau of original things which is so deeply projective, in the guise in which Rousseau, Turgot, Condorcet, Iselin, Volney, Schiller, the young Schelling have sketched it? Definitely not. Absolute cultural novicehood is not always equal to a childhood; and nor does it exhaust the expressive richness of the phrases and metaphors of childhood. These two reflexive projections undercut themselves; but under what conditions is the primitive age a childhood? This comes to the same thing as to ask how the valued meaning of childhood stands in relation to the theme of radical beginning and in relation to the sequence of historical perspective.

For the resorting to metaphors of childhood is oriented by a valuation. One might say that the category of childhood is only explanatory when it is not neutral. In all other cases, it is merely a question of a mode of expression, of a purely verbal parenthesis which is no more than a vulgarised extension of the metaphor. When, for example, Cuvier speaks of the childhood of the earth, he is merely using a current expression, to which no particular meaning is attached; but if expressions of this kind

were and indeed still are, in general use, one could say that it was because the culmination of the work of a metaphor is the start of a commonplace. In the forgotten area of neutral expressions, sleeps on the game of evaluation which created their success. Speculation upon the first stages of collective reality could only be elucidated by the denomination of childhood according to the extent to which the intuitive substructure of the idea of childhood is given value.

It is known that classical thought has no tenderness for the state of childhood. Every intellectualist view of Man is concerned with the being within him who is equipped for rational activity. All that is immaturity, weakness, unawareness, all that seems to be the faltering and confused threshold of the person in the true sense of the world, inspires no more in the best than a distancing.

These nurselings who are kept at a distance, these children dressed up as miniature adults and rigorously formed both socially and intellectually with an eye to their future status as reasonable beings, what a lengthy introduction they have to a life whose average duration now seems short to us. Nevertheless, the qualitative time passed in this first state is contemptuously rejected. The rational being, from his heights of serenity and vigour, looks away from his displeasing chrysalis. The physical helplessness of very early childhood, the mental incompetence of later childhood are themes which are held up as objects for the deploration of preachers, for the same reason as other natural manifestations of the imperfections of humanity. Nor did the classical philosopher enjoy thinking that he had once been a child; he did not like to think of man as being linked with childhood, and would not know how to conceive of him as being identified with childhood. As far as classical anthropology is concerned, we are born to reason, which is preceded by a few years of latency in imperfection. Spinoza says that the only reason why we do not pity children, who cannot speak, nor walk, nor think, and who pass so many years in virtual ignorance of themselves, is because we know that the state is general and transitory. And yet this state is more "incredible" than madness. If we did not know it, if we did not see it, could we believe that it was the same being? "A man of greater age thinks their nature so different from his own that he could not convince

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himself that he had ever been a child, unless he made a guess, from the observation of others, about himself.”⁶ That other whom we know we once were, and whom we no longer recognise in ourselves, would not be credible to us unless experience compelled us to believe; and deep down we accept the idea without really believing in it. Childhood is that which is other in man, that which is inconceivable in man, even more than madness, according to Spinoza; it is that reality to which experience testifies and which the adult identity can never recover. So quite naturally, this disturbing dimension undergoes a double complementary strain; it is eluded, it is set apart from the rational anthropological universe, of which it is the willingly unknown fault; and on the other hand it serves the purpose of formulating and relating to other dimensions of human otherness. It is to conjure with one obscure idea to make it carry the weight of another homologous obscure idea. The silent disgrace of infantilism is given the function of throwing light with the use of the reassuring metaphor, upon the explicit disgrace of primitiveness. And maybe, to be able to speak of the intimate otherness of childhood, it is necessary to take the roundabout way of those other men, who are less directly menacing because they are distant in time or space, as if the idea of an intrinsic mental difference could only be envisaged after going to the limits.

Thus there is a pejorative side to metaphors of childhood. In every domain which relates to the acquisition of knowledge, they have an unfavourable qualification by virtue of a kind of intellectual retrospection which breaks away from the imperfections of things which have been superseded. And in a derived way, a metaphorical childhood indicates a state of imperfect knowledge in any beginning. This stage is virtually inevitable, but one must make haste to get beyond it. When Comte deplors the “present childhood of political philosophy,” “the state of childhood in which the fundamental science of social development is still languishing,”⁷ he implies a state of preliminary imperfection: a new kind of scholarship first undergoes a phase

⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Bk. V, scholium of propr. VI; Bk. IV, scholium of propr. XXXIX.

⁷ Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Paris, 1877, t. IV, lesson 49, p. 348; lesson 46, p. 85.

of transient immaturity, so that the childhood of an intellectual enterprise is both a slur on and a justification of its imperfection. Here lies all the ambiguity of childhood: it is inevitable, but it is only tolerable when it is in the past. When this ambiguity is given a pejorative slant, then among the images to be underlined out of those which assimilate the awakening of reason in the human race into the individual situation of a child, is that of the childishness of the first steps taken. And the truly intellectual disrepute which is expressed in childhood can be extended to the whole of the character: Herder denounced the puerility of the Chinese, who were set in a stiff, ritualised and artificial childhood; Hegel, the essentially puerile basis of Hindu philosophy, or again the thriftless passivity of the Paraguayan Indians who let themselves live from day to day like thoughtless children...⁸ From signifying a temporary imperfection, the pejorative meaning of childhood comes to indicate a stables state of dependence and subordination, the essence of hierarchical inferiority, through a second metaphor. This is the case when, for Comte, "positive biology tends to show definitively that the female sex, principally in our species, as though constituted by necessity, is, in comparison to the other sex, in a state of permanent childhood."⁹

From all the depreciatory views of childhood, two points should be retained as both open out towards an exit from childhood, and a reconciliation in retrospect. The first brings the negative function of childhood into play as a violent and ignorant past. In this sense, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre says that the human race, which God created as one single man, needs must have passed through the night of ignorance and childish prejudice; each race has had an imbecile childhood, a credulous adolescence, and an unbridled youth; this is why history is no more than a chain of exterminations and absurd cruelties.¹⁰ And Turgot, with remarkable vigour, pushes the functional integration of violent passions to its limit, referring to hatred, vengeance, which have been salutary in their time; "before laws had formed social customs, these odious passions were nonetheless necessary for

⁸ Hegel, *Lessons on the History of Philosophy; Introduction to the Philosophy of History*; Herder, *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, Bk. XI.

⁹ Comte, *Cours...*, lesson 50, p. 405.

¹⁰ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Paris, 1966, Preamble, p. 65.

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the defence of individuals and nations. They were, if I may make so bold as to speak in those terms, the leading-strings with which nature and its creator led the childhood of the human race."¹¹ Inevitably one thinks of the way in which Kant integrated war and antagonism into the *Idea of an Universal History, from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* which was so warmly admired by Saint-Simon, and by Comte. It is certain that, however sombrely one chooses to view the historic past, by calling that past a childhood, one prevents it from placing the whole of the development of history in bondage. The present is not directly qualitatively continuous with its childhood; it does not depend on it, nor correspond with it, it succeeds and supplants it with good reason.

A second point connected with the pejorative appraisal of historical childhood is the incitement to the emergence from childhood as a minority. The name of Kant is connected with this important theme; emancipation is equally claimed by, for example, Volney: "the pedants of the human race dubbed it a little child, they bade it to be wise, out of fear of spirits and ghosts. Now that the human race is growing up, it is time to speak reasonably to it..."¹² And by this path one encounters the idea which is met again further on, of the bonds, the fetters, even the necessary oppressions which pertain to the first steps taken by the human race, but which are in future harmful as they are obsolete. In fact, when one finds oneself persuaded to recognise the legitimacy of those features, unprepossessing though they may be, by which one characterises historical childhood, when one justifies them in their place and in their time, on the understanding that one is dealing henceforward with a past episode, this childhood is already essentially ambiguous. A change of emphasis is all that is needed to make the tumultuous, brutal and lawless past appear, as childhood does, like a necessary education. Necessary childhood is, by this fact alone, positive childhood, as soon as history is conceived as following the dictates of development. The least perfection of the initial state, and the ignorance and credulity of the first ages, are just so many necessary stages

¹¹ Turgot, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, *Œuvres*, ed. Daire, Paris, 1844, t. II, p. 633.

¹² Volney, *La loi naturelle ou catéchisme du citoyen français*, Paris, 1934, p. 39.

in the maturation of the human spirit. This maturation cannot be rushed, or forced, and its delays and meanders must be respected. Whether the subject is Condorcet, or whether it is Lessing, this view allows childhood the positive but relative status of a beginning. One can recognise and keep the function of the obsolete going, without there really being any nostalgia for it as such. Because of its situation in the whole development of history, and because of the barriers and the psychological traits which pertain to it, the human race appears in retrospect to be simultaneously lacking in all the rich accumulations of the centuries it has not yet experienced, and illumined by the shining future to which it was leading.

But when one does not permit oneself to place the subsequent in a superior position to the previous, and does not arrange history according to the criterion of progress, then one relies much more heavily upon the qualitative consistency of the beginning. We may have left childhood behind, but we have not surpassed it, is Herder's claim; the change is not a growth, the development is not a progression. What we have gained on one hand, we have lost on the other, and perhaps the most precious thing was that which remained recessed within us. This is a decision about individual life, which, here, relates to the image of the ages which is applied to humanity. If man does in essence, identify himself with the full development and control of his intellectual powers, then he finds his apogee at the moment of considered maturity. So one could read the European topicality of the Enlightenment as being a maturity, in relation to which mythical origins, the ancient past, and the ethnological difference are all three reinstated as a common childhood. But if one puts the price of human life on psychological traits which precede all reflectiveness, that is, on spontaneity, grace, ingenuousness, the innocence of strength, then of necessity all those values are drawn backwards and no longer pertain to us, except in the form of a lyrical nostalgia. That which is childish is the deepest thing. It is true that for Herder actuality was in adulthood, but this does not make it superior to what went before it: it is part of the over-intellectual adult's conceit to state his own position as the norm. And in this case, historic childhood is privileged in the differences it can boast. Not only because one must start

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somewhere, and it is normal for the beginning not to be as perfect as later development, not simply on account of its localisation and necessary function, but because the times when the whole sense of an oriental and patriarchal idyll were being instituted are beautiful. So what one understands by childhood is less the mythical origins coloured by ethnological revelation—"the human race in the state in which Captain Cook discovered it"—in a particular place, as Saint-Simon would have it, than the ancient past. Historical childhood is incarnate in nations whose successive apogee retraces the psychological development of the personified human race. The lost grandeurs of this ancient past are extolled at the same time as the psychological characteristics of a lost freshness. The youthful world, the dawn of history, its noble simplicity, its luminous spontaneity, its innocent ardour, all have the paradoxical impact of promises: their accomplishment is achieved at the price of their abolition. This is the paradox which makes childhoods so deeply beloved of romantic philosophies of history.

An analogous consideration is at play behind the romantic thesis of the original global perfection of child-humanity. Men of early times are characterised by liveliness of imagination, and sensitivity: if imagination and sensitivity are instruments of knowledge, then humanity, from the very beginning, held a confused but immediate global knowledge which since then, we toil to come at in a discursive way. The beginning will not have been that most elementary and simple one that we can find within ourselves by a reduction, an elimination of chance culture; the beginning will have been a richness handed over entire, present all in a moment, known before it was learnt, and which we must now learn over again. This is the case with, for example, original monotheism, which was later lost and scattered in polytheism. Thus all history is the temporalised repetition of the primordial scene. History rediscovers, but does not innovate: everything was given in the initial revelation. If everything was not present from the beginning, then how could it make an appearance in time? This romantic theme is found, again, in its sober guise, in Conte's work,—that the seed of positive spirit was present from the beginning—, or in Saint-Simon's, "Humanity half-saw, during its childhood, all the truths which it has

seen proved since it arrived at its maturity of age.”¹³ A primordial mythical figure, the omniscient and sleepwalking men of the first age are above all perhaps a projective area of the reflection upon time’s renewal.

And even further, the images of innocence and poetry which are connected with the idea of childhood, make it less into the past than into the final limit of mankind. Wisdom sends us back to childhood, according to Pascal, and in doing to translates the duality of classical attitudes concerning childhood. Intellectually, a past from which an adult must free himself and turn away is an imperfect one; but in a spiritual argument it is the figure of purity. It is the name given to the perfection of the religious life; less a regression than a renunciation. It is the inward state towards which one must strive, and it is perfectly inimitable; like grace, like sanctity, childhood cannot be won. The spiritual values of childhood are simultaneously lost and unlosable; here above any other is the area in which one does not find oneself. Through this dimension of values childhood is no longer properly speaking an age which is localised in the course of a life, but the forbidden mirror of simplicity in which the human identity searches for itself. It is infinitely precious, as being the sealed casket containing the other who I really am.

Because it lies at the centre of contradictory valuations, the idea of childhood is used in different historical perspectives. The biographical scheme of ages is no less equivocal for being applied to humanity rather than the individual. It integrates all the aspects of the past, but as though they had been transcended; it relates primitiveness to the present, but does so through a fundamental qualitative alteration. It neither speaks completely about otherness, nor about sameness. Are we dealing with the succession of our ages in so clear and unequivocal a relationship that its scheme can make us understand all of human developments? The idea of a fundamental childhood of humanity is only explanatory or expressive as the function of the intentions which it finds itself charged with, and of the values which are dreamed of in it.

¹³ Saint-Simon, *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du XIX^e siècle*, *Œuvres choisies*, Bruxelles, 1859, t. I, p. 110.

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THE ETERNALLY CHILDISH

In the great biographical scheme which assimilates the course of universal history into the development of ages of one life, the characters in the childhood of the human species adhere both to the first position in time, and to the psychology which is peculiar to childhood. In other words, there is a psychology special to childhood, which is independent of cultural and historic conditions, and permanent in its essence and its manifestations. So that the most distant past is also the most directly knowable, since it is the one which has never left our side, but remained steady; it is still being played out under our very eyes. We find it reflexively within ourselves, and each man is a witness for the whole of humanity. According to Comte, the individual and the species start in the same way, follow the same general evolution, experience the same fundamental eras: "thus, when each one of us contemplates his own past, he must remember that he has been successively, as far as his most important ideas are concerned, a theologian in his childhood, a metaphysician in his youth, and a physician in his adulthood. It is easy for any men who are abreast of their century to verify this."¹⁴ It is enough to look into oneself to get a direct and in some way experimental view of collective childhood. It is enough to look around one to find confirmation of these speculations about origins. The state of childhood, as we have seen, is loaded with contradictory values, and much uncertainty, but the tenor of childhood seems perfectly evident. It is evident because accessible: all childhood elucidates all childhood; it is also evident because the childish mentality lends itself to being encompassed in a simple fashion by reflection. The organisation of its psychological field is incomparably more rudimentary than the adult's, so that it is easy to isolate the dominant principle or principles from it.

This is all the more easy for the fact that these principles are pure stereotypes. The less one knows of children in concrete terms, the better can one give an account, with the help of the eternal characteristics of childhood, of the collective and fundamental realities which concern us. Since childhood is a simple and unequivocal perspective, partial aspects, which are isolated

¹⁴ Comte, *Cours...*, *Œuvres choisies*, Paris, Aubier, lesson 1, p. 62.

as psychological principles, explain everything which relates to it, and justify everything that one refers back to it with one word. Far from that the observation of concrete childhood controlling conjecture relating to distant childhood; here the points of view we are putting forward concerning the species draw their justification from a stereotyped illustration. Thus psychological commonplaces control the metaphorical depiction of childhood; and it is done in a selective way, functionally to the degree to which they concur with the point to be established. Childlike naturalness is a convention: here the type of childishness which is best suited to the needs of the arguments is brought to the fore. This is why it is possible to pick out the selective usage of different conventional traits commonly attributed to childish mentality. These children who are evoked at the confines of certitude are ingenuous figures. Their state is one of ingenuousness itself, and a sort of obscure innocence. "The history of the human race begins with a state of innocence, as does the history of every individual. That state of innocence is none other than a state of childhood. In childhood, we do not know ourselves; we are not yet capable of distinguishing in our souls between a rule and a whim. We follow the one without knowing it, and obey it without merit, we abandon ourselves to the other with extreme trust, without scruple and without blame. Most often the whims are blameless, and blamelessness merely seems to be a whim; we are innocent, because we do not yet know good or evil."¹⁵ This is a primitive unity which precedes discriminations. They are still concealed within the weakness of perception and obscure judgement. Men, as children, one might say, experience pleasures which, though weak, are not much frustrated; their sensations tend to become confused. "Like children who begin to make use of their senses, these men do not perceive objects clearly; even more frequently their weak memories reproduce past impressions badly; it is not a rarity for their irrepressible imagination to make them take fancies for realities."¹⁶ So they are naïf, trusting, and credulous. Like their understanding, their character is unstable: caprice, not will-power. Thus they can be reassured as easily as they can be frightened.

¹⁵ Ancillon, *Essais philosophiques*, Paris-Geneva, 1817, t. I, p. 94-95.

¹⁶ I. Iselin, *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zurich, 1770, t. I, p. 197.

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Everything in this misty and uncertain childhood of personality bears the stamp of weakness, the still uncertain steps convey more sweetness than vigour. And yet, in another image, a young creature is rough-hewn, coarse and without restraint. When Saint-Simon defines childhood, whether of a society or of an individual, as having an irresistible tendency to appropriate anything which is useful for its development,¹⁷ these children make another possible discussion, with their aggressiveness and scrounging: that is, naive brutality against naive laziness, vivacity against weakness. On this basis, the depiction of childhood by metaphor can be placed: Is it an idyll? Is it barbarous?

This axiom can be illustrated by the complementary but unconnected orders of passivity and violence. Herder denounces China as being set, hierarchical and conventional, and for having puerile baubles, and for being so universally submissive. It is known that childhood was the first stage, the oriental phase of the life of the spirit, to Hegel. It is the moment of natural immediacy, the moment when the individual has not yet established and freed his conscience; childhood is in some ways the chrysalis of liberty. Here again the state of China appears as the type of initial depersonalisation. But at the same time, childhood is courted, "he who has not the tranquillity and trust of a little child, but who loves violence and conflict."¹⁸ Impulsiveness, aggression, and brutality, are, rhetorically speaking the reverse side of childhood. All the remaining dimensions can follow on in the unfolding of historical childhood, and the different nations are successive incarnations of the different stages. Herder depicts the awakening of the childish spirit, gentle and docile, in the Orient of the Patriarchs, where "everything bore the flavour of the mother's milk and the father's wine." This ignorant and enthusiastic childish heart is naturally religious; and its religion is not philosophical deism; nor does it come about because of the machinations of priests; but it amounts, in its poetic liveliness, and candour, to the character of childhood: were we them hoping to discover "an old man of three" in this dawn of the world? Then humanity identifies its training-period with Egypt. The happy and indolent shepherd loses his childlike delicacy

¹⁷ Saint-Simon, *De la physiologie appliquée à l'amélioration des institutions sociales, Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin*, t. 39, p. 181.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*.

there; he bows before order, diligence, and the advantages and restrictions which are conferred by any legislation. "The child was no longer in leading-strings: the young boy was seated on a school bench, learning about order, work, and the principles of citizenship." This studious and hard-working child has a brother, the Phoenician trader, who is "the boy who is almost grown up, who went a-roving, and spread the small change of what remained of ancient wisdom and skill in the markets and through the streets." And in the wake of this rogue, the handsome profile of the dexterous and daring Greek begins to be sketched out.¹⁹

Adolescence is a metaphorical state of vigour, liveliness, and strength. The psychological difference which, in the definition, is pertinent to youth, tends towards the predominance of active spontaneity and enthusiastic intuition. From a romantic point of view, a trifling conceptualisation is not discreditable; thus wrote Savigny: "the youth of the nations is poor in concepts, but it rejoices in a clear conscience about its contacts and relationships, and feels and experiences them deeply and entirely, while we, in our artificial existence, are overwhelmed by our own wealth, instead of enjoying and controlling it."²⁰ Thus, metaphorical childhood sometimes shares these advantages and characters of youth, and sometimes remains this side of them: controlled by the imagination without really having the strength. The vital emotive values are not salient in childhood, except when the puerile and the juvenile are not dissociated. Most frequently they are, and childhood is characterised less by affective energy than by a mental attitude of concrete naïveté, and ingenuous simplicity. When Schelling was barely a young man, he asked what the spirit of childhood was, while inquiring into primitive myths. And his answer was: the child is ignorant, and that is why the childhood of the nations is so rich in wonders and legends; a nation which lives in a state of childhood, is linked to the tradition it received from its forefathers; for it, the imagination is the most powerful of the spirit faculties; and its language is rich in living images, and sensitive pictures and descriptions. The most ancient legends of a people, therefore, have the characteristics of childhood: myth, simplicity tied to a sense of wonder,

¹⁹ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*.

²⁰ Savigny, *Vom Beruf unserer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft*, Heidelberg, 1840, p. 9.

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without art because without artifice.²¹ In short, a fully naive mental outlook, therefore a concrete and imaginative understanding, a disposition which is at once barely marked, and without restraint, lacking in any moral feeling, but with a naturally artless way of behaving. But how difficult it still is to define the state of childhood through these notations, when it is loaded with such a weight of speculation!

THE CHILDHOODS OF REASON

All around these fleeting representations, a whole conception of reason is in play. Intellectual childhood, political childhood, linguistic and mythological childhoods of humanity, all allow of the distinction between the beginnings, the past, the first basic steps taken, outmoded aspects, in short, the nature and history of human reason. Since "general intelligence and universal intelligence develop according to the same law," the march of the human spirit and the development of individual intelligence throw light upon each other; "the history of civilisation is thus nothing but the history of the life of the human race, that is to say, the physiology of its different ages..."²² One can perhaps predict the progression from the well-known to the less-known; one can in any case know it in retrospect. It is necessary to establish that human understanding has not always been guided, and is not everywhere guided, by the clear system of reason: that other form of understanding, however, is attached to ours in a state of childhood. The human spirit began: according to La Mettrie, it began with a state of latency which preceded the appearance of signs. "In those times when the universe was almost dumb, the soul was... like a little child (for at that time the soul was in its childhood) who held in his hand a certain number of little bits of straw or wood, saw them in general in a vague, superficial way, without being able to count them."²³ This is a confused perception; "Man starts by being a child, with an

²¹ Schelling, *Über Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der ältesten Welt*, Works, ed. Cotta, Stuttgart, 1856, t. I, p. 51-53.

²² Saint-Simon, *Introduction...*, p. 117; *De la physiologie...*, p. 178. Also cf. Fourier, *Œuvres*, Paris, 1841, t. I, p. 56; t. II, p. 15.

²³ La Mettrie, *L'homme machine*, Paris, 1966, p. 83.

obscure understanding of the world and of itself.”²⁴ But also, according to Comte, “it is a characteristic pretention to perform, on the whole of corresponding phenomena, a free action.” This primitive illusion, primitive aberration, has “always characterised the childhood of human reason, in relation to all possible speculations, even to the simplest.” In the childhood of humanity the weakness of the means is in contrast with the indefinite will to power. This is the very meaning of the whole of the age of theology, and it is this which occurs again in the “theologico-metaphysical childhood, which was pretty protracted... and still persists in the order of social ideas.”²⁵ one hears everything explained, but in such an arbitrary way that it is contrary to the idea of law. So the childhood of human reason is, for Comte, necessarily linked to theological philosophy and polytheism; this link is necessary, and admirable in its vigour and its effects, since it carries with it in its spontaneity the whole of the later development of philosophy, religion, and institutions already.

The social childhood of the races lends itself to various themes. Basic equality: in default of Rousseau, who does not employ that metaphor on this point, one can turn again to Volney: “upon the chaotic and savage earth, ... in the childhood of the nations, when men still lived in forests, all subject to the same needs, all endowed with the same faculties, they were almost all equal in power...”²⁶ Primordial subordination: if one sees the paradigm of political power in the family situation, if, as de Maistre says, “the first man was the king of his children,” then the childhood appears straight away to be subject to paternal authority. “Nations are born and die like individuals; they have fathers, literally speaking, and founders...”²⁷ But argumentation which relates to political childhood, considers it to be, above all, a concrete age, to be precise, which has its own consistency, an essentially transitory one. In the first place, there is a natural agreement between the institutions of a nation, and the stage

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Comte, *Cours...*, t. IV, lesson 48, p. 220, p. 221; lesson 51, p. 475; lesson 48, p. 223.

²⁶ Volney, *Les Ruines*, Paris, 1838, p. 16, p. 19.

²⁷ De Maistre, *Etude sur la souveraineté, Œuvres complètes*, Lyon, 1884, t. I. p. 323, p. 325.

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of its development; this equation should be respected; it is particularly important not to misrepresent it. "Youth is not childhood. Both for nations and for men," said Rousseau, "there is a time of youth, or if you like, of maturity, that one must wait for, before attempting to subject them to laws."²⁸ Nothing is gained, quite the contrary, by attempts to forestall it. And this is why, in the second place, childhood is a time when political tutelage is necessary. Violence, war, slavery, "in the childhood of society, institutions which consecrated the power of man over man were a necessary step towards the system of civilisation we have reached now, from barbarity:"²⁹ And according to Herder: "that which is indispensable to everyone in his childhood, was equally so to the human race in its childhood; what we stigmatise today as being a despotism, was, earlier, a benevolent protective tutelage."³⁰ But, and this is a third point, the human race, no more than man, has need of a master who will maintain him in an eternal state of minority.³¹ From now on, we have emerged from childhood, and we no longer have need of political leading-strings. Saint-Simon protests "Why should one wish maintain a system which is suited to childhood, now that we have reached the organic state which belongs to adulthood?" And in even more physiological language: "if the natural course of things brought about the birth of institutions which were necessary to every age of the body politic; if it brought the healthy rule which was best in tune with its constitution at different times, why should we preserve habits of hygiene which do not agree with our physiological state?"³² Whether according to judicious emancipation or medical diet, childhood is on the wrong side of political liberty.

Linguistic childhood is a complex area of speculation. Whether it is a question of the first complete establishment of a primitive language which is integrally meaningful, or whether it is a question of the progressive and empirical acquisition of signs, the young child who is learning to speak employs caution towards speculative

²⁸ Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, Paris, Garnier, 1962, p. 264.

²⁹ *Exposition de la doctrine saint-simonienne*, Paris, 1924, 4th seance, p. 215 note.

³⁰ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*.

³¹ Herder, *Ideas...*

³² Saint-Simon, *De la physiologie...*, p. 190.

views and stakes: that is to say that all observation is perceived and deciphered through the stereotype invoked by it. Thus the language of action, which deals purely in gesture and expression, "that primitive language of the human race, originally used in the childhood of the first societies..."³³. And thus above all the arrival of onomatopoeia. The child's first attempt is always monosyllabic, says F. Schlegel; it is the "cry of nature." So the childhood of the language is first of all monosyllabic, then dissyllabic, then trisyllabic. Thus Chinese, which is a monosyllabic language, constitutes a first step in the childhood of the language according to the historico-progressive line of thinking. "The language of this nation, which is in other ways so refined, is therefore placed in an inferior position; perhaps because, through its highly artificial system of writing, the childhood of this nation became set too soon."³⁴

The child-man is naturally religious. He is religious by the characteristics which are peculiar to him; he is gentle, unaware, trusting, his feelings are strong but confused, he surrenders himself to the wonders of poetry. His religious views and feelings are also due to his position in time. He who is the creature of beginnings experiences within himself the birth of those religious ideas whose origins are lost "in the darkness of time, in the childhood of the nations, back to the very beginning of the world." Let us recapture the moment, from within, with Volney's aid, the moment when man "began to realise that he was subject to forces more powerful than himself, and independent of his will. The sun lighted his way, warmed him, fire burned him, thunder frightened him, water stifled him, wind disturbed him; all existence worked on him in a powerful and irresistible way... And man, in the simple childhood of his reasoning faculty, spoke to the sun and the moon; he animated the great natural agents with his soul and his passions..."³⁵ It used to be current to see the first natural human religion in Sabaism, or the cult of the stars: and this thesis was supported by the attraction of a psychological reconstruction of this kind. That is, to dream of

³³ J. Itard, *Rapport sur les nouveaux développements de Victor de l'Aveyron*, published with L. Malson, *Les enfants sauvages*, p. 170. Paris, 1964.

³⁴ F. Schlegel, *Complete Works*, Vienna, 1846, *Philosophie des Lebens*, lesson VI; *Philosophie der Geschichte*, lesson VI, p. 173-174; *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, Heidelberg, 1808. p. 49.

³⁵ Volney, *Les Ruines*, p. 50-52.

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the man who would be born in the multiple presence of an incomprehensible but brilliant and powerful world, to dream up that fully human but strictly uncultivated gaze, and to rediscover the principle of the very first scale of rationalisation in the very nature of the emotion. So the worship of the stars, polytheism, animism, and, in a general way, the numinous demultiplication of nature could have seemed to be adequately explained. But this satisfaction is never more than the illusion of a reflexive ascesis, and the trap of an impossible identification.

These are the liminary images of original naivete. In another dimension, childhood is essentially the age of learning and formation. The intellectual and religious childhood of the human race can be seen as a necessary journey through mistakes, as an unfolding path which is an education. Self-teaching of reason by the progressive purification of its spontaneous and aberrant forms, or, with Lessing, the pedagogy of revelation. Education and revelation find their meeting-point in a pedagogical metaphor of childhood. Lessing explains religious history as one of moral and theological pedagogy: a people who are still incapable of abstract ideas, still submerged in childhood, could not accept anything but the system of education which was adapted to the special needs of childhood, the education according to immediate material sanctions. In the same way, the Bible has all the characteristics of an elementary manual. It contains preparations, and allusions and indications which relate to later understanding, it presents abstract truths in personified forms, and in a simple, attractive style. "There you have all the qualities of an elementary book, whether it be destined for children or for a people which is still in its childhood." And since an elementary manual corresponds to a given age, the most perfect of manuals could itself be superseded.³⁶ A certain current view of what the years of childhood are suited to, and what their pedagogic needs are, becomes, for Lessing, down to the last detail, the fundamental scheme of religious history of the key to providential economy. The stage of childhood, its position at the beginning, and its essentially evolutionary and transitory character, from this point on constitute the illuminating paradigm of all human history.

³⁶ Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, § 16, 44-51.

ANACHRONISTIC CHILDHOOD

After having tried to explore what childhoods there are, it remains to consider who children are. On this point one could sketch out a sort of historical and mythical geography of representations. Here would be the Asian childhood: the Orient in the time of the patriarchs, the golden age of childish humanity³⁷; India, where man does not yet differentiate between his individuality and the unity of essence; Herder, Schlegel and Hegel's China, ossified in childish submissiveness and artificial ingenuousness. Here also would be an American childhood, sunk in a passive minority, the Paraguayan Indians consigned to an authority which is necessarily parental in character because of their laziness, improvidence, and lack of initiative. "Thus the Americans are like careless children who live from day to day, denied all reflection, and all higher considerations."³⁸ Here also would be the African childhood, state of innocence in unawareness and immediacy.³⁹ And in an even more fundamental and imprecise way, here, encircling European modernity, are all the different aspects of humanity, those which are thrown into relief by travellers' tales, those which we try to study in children who have, by chance, been kept from a civilising environment, and become savages, those whom we seek at the disturbing borders of animality or normality.⁴⁰ So this inexplicable difference within humanity which we find it to include, has the function of expressing the other dimension of human difference, human childhood.

And childhood is invoked to do justice to great areas of anthropological meditation. On the axis of the development of the ages, the past is a childhood: this qualitative stage is left behind, though necessary. The beginning is a childhood in a reflective and mythical perspective, which attempts to reestablish the first steps of uncivilised man. Cultural otherness, therefore, as the growing wealth of the field of ethnology shows, is also cultural childhood. It is seen as a prolonged or protracted

³⁷ Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, p. 123.

³⁸ Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 234.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴⁰ Cf. L. Malson, *op. cit.*; F. Tinland, *L'homme sauvage*, Paris, 1968.

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childhood, like the original universal state which, in some, has not been replaced. Already the attribution of roles and ages to the historical succession of nations fixed their essence in a momentary way: Greece is forever adolescent, China is permanently infantile. As for those other people who have not yet found themselves in the course of the great day of the Spirit, it were all the more tempting to speak of them as of the infantile mentality of an adult nation, that is to say of a nation which still today is set in childhood, as we have generally and significantly done. On the subject of civilisations, the other relates to ours as an anachronistic past. This is a temporal axis, but particularly a qualitative one, which rests on the assurance of essential similarity. The explanatory power of the idea of childhood, in this domain, assume that the time-pivot is the stage adult Europe has reached, and that from this one can establish a sort of pathology of the succession of the ages: as if childhood, the universal initial stage, could, when maintained permanently, and unabandoned, when persistent, give us an anachronistic replay of the primitive. Thus otherness is warded off too late, and the position of these other men, confirms our identity.

This confirmation is for the present lost. The metaphor of the childhood of humanity is no longer explanatory since all the terms which it bound together have changed in content and meaning. From now on, we know that childhood is not an archaism in relation to the individual. We know, since Freud, that it is not the rudimentary stage, nor appropriate as the type of everything that is most simple in us, and that, on the contrary, the relation between our present and our past is the decisive arc of individual complexity. From now on, cultural otherness has become politically contemporaneous; and just as our vision of the relations between child and adult of which we represent both have fluctuated, so European modernity has fluctuated in a planetary actuality. And so from now on, our anthropological approach is decentralised, inaugurating an unpivoted comparativeness without absolute standards. On this count justice must be done to the role of Lévy-Bruhl, as he set himself against Tylor's animism, and, if I may say such a thing, against his childishness. Tylor understood the animist mentality to be a puerile state of mind: rather than explaining different civilisations by the puerile

and incorrect use of common psychological principles, Lévy-Bruhl prefers to avoid trying to bring all mental functions of the universe back to one type, but instead to postulate from the start two heterogeneous kinds of mental structure. Even if it may today appear artificial to us, this duality was a firm way of recognising fully the substantiality of the other. The primitive is not out of true line in relation to us, it is really different from us; without, however, being so altered, or made other, for us to be unable to find and reconstitute it from within. The duality of types was not a tenable position, and it is known that Lévy-Bruhl progressively replaced it by the idea of universal bipolarity of conceptual or logical constants, whether affective or mystical, which are distributed according to variable proportions.⁴¹

It is sure that the prelogical mentality, such as Lévy-Bruhl presents it, still remains dangerously close to stereotypes of childhood, from which one cannot escape unless one brings analysis to bear upon actions and not upon mentalities; nevertheless, this problem which was approached by use of opaque categories which had very quickly to be abandoned, is the problem of ethnological reflection itself, as a reflection upon identity and otherness. This reflection is no longer elucidated by the metaphor of childhood. The great perspective of the ages of humanity which for so long and so prominently related status and history, function and succession, meaning and order, belongs now only to the reflective history of ideas. Now, in this integrally contemporary world, where all ages and all civilisations observe each other, we are well aware that there are no other children than ourselves.

⁴¹ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, London, 1873, t. I, p. 284, p. 304. L. Lévy-Bruhl, see especially *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Paris, 1951, p. 20, p. 454, *Les Carnets*, Paris, 1949, p. 73.