

“We Can Never Be Born Enough”

Re-creating the Myth of Childhood Through Three Poems

Childhood, for most of us, is little more than a collection of blurred memories, their edges rough and fuzzy and indistinct, each memory disjointed from the rest. There are overlaps, but the relationships between them have been lost. It is, possibly, the most significant, most formative time of our lives, setting the stage for everything that is to come, yet it is largely lost to us. No wonder, then, that people who write about childhood often tend to mythologize it, to re-create a world that perhaps never was—and more significantly, perhaps never could have been. There are exceptions, of course, (Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* is a notable one), but more often we re-create childhood as a myth, as the ancients created their own myths to explain what *they* have forgotten.

Many philosophers (especially Friedrich Nietzsche) often distinguish between the Apollonian—the world of light and order, of reason and harmony—and the Dionysian—the world of darkness and chaos, where one may experience both pleasure and pain. While the ancient Greeks did not view these gods as diametrically opposed, modern audiences tend to view things in much more black and white terms, forming a convenient, if not always accurate, dichotomy. Stephen King (in his brilliant *Danse Macabre*) uses this dichotomy to analyze the horror genre, which has its own mythology, but it is also a useful dichotomy when talking about any sort of mythology, especially the mythology of childhood. When discussing how poets treat childhood, it makes an interesting arc for us to hang our arguments on.

Galway Kinnell’s “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps” is set firmly in this bright, sunlit Apollonian world. A description of a child who can sleep through anything, except his parents’ lovemaking, it is overwhelmingly a positive poem, a happy poem; there is nothing in it

to cause us fear or grief. The poem, Kinnell tells us, was written when his son Fergus was about six years old, when “the oedipal juices were flowing through his veins” (Kinnell, 1980), and although this can be a turbulent time for any child going through it, as well as for their parents, Kinnell’s touch is light, not somber, with no trace of oedipal angst. He knows it is a necessary stage that will pass and allows himself to enjoy it thoroughly. His reassuring tone echoes Nietzsche’s adage that “[w]hat is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil” (52).

From the title down to the smallest detail, his language is concrete, sober, happy. He tells us that he [Kinnell] “can snore like a bullhorn or play loud music...” (1-2). He describes his son Fergus’s pajamas, “the neck opening so small | he has to screw them on...” (13-14), then his son himself, “his little, startlingly muscled body” (21). These are concrete details, meant to reassure us. There is nothing here which hints at future suffering or pain, no thought of one’s own mortality. It’s not that Kinnell is incapable of writing such things—as he does in his “After the Death of a Nephew,” although in that poem he touches on the death of a child only tangentially.

In Daniel Tobin’s “The Clock” we begin to move away from that happy Apollonian world into darker territory. Again, we have a small child (so small, in fact, that he cannot yet tell time), “[b]ored with plastic armies” (line 1). Out of that boredom, he moves to the clock, and, though young, here we get the first glimpse of his coming mortality:

[he] doesn’t know how in no time
 those numbers will fill his day
 the way water fills a bath
 into which an exhausted man
 lowers himself, not wanting to rise. (5-9)

Though the child is perhaps only five or six, already the father is aware that someday he

will be an old man, hinting that time, like a warm bath at the end of a very long day, is something we sink into, and at the end of it all, we do not want to run away from our mortality.

His mother then teaches him to tell time, and he becomes aware of hours, of minutes. It's at this point that the poem cuts to the quick. What is time to a child this young? What is time to any aborigine, whose only knowledge of time is the rising and setting of the sun? But by putting labels on it ("that's hours," "the big hand's minutes" [18-19]), suddenly we become aware of it, as the boy does too: "*I'm older now, and now, and now.* The gears I start to tick through every room of that house" (23-24). And in this sentence, "that house" doesn't seem to refer so much to the poet's house, but to the boy's body: the seconds, the minutes, the hours will tick through his body until he is dead.

These two poems, though one light and one dark, are still realistic. We can read them and imagine ourselves thinking these things. Kinnell's touch is lighter, and we sense the joy he takes in fatherhood ("this blessing love gives again into our arms" [24]) Tobin's work is deeper, darker; a little harder to make out at first, but it is still firmly set in the Apollonian world we prefer to inhabit. It is as much a look at the poet's own mortality as his son's, for how can we question the issue of our children's demise if we have not yet questioned our own?

Making a break completely away from these two poems, we have e. e. cumming's [in Just]. Here is a poem firmly set in that twilight Dionysian world, and it is worth noting that cummings never gave his poems titles. The naming of things gives a sense of order; his poems lack that sense of order. His line structure, his disregard for the conventional rules of capitalization, punctuation, or even word usage also reflect that lack of order, and even give us permission to create our own order. (And what is the job of an adolescent?—to make adult, Apollonian order out of our Dionysian childhood experiences.)

There is nothing here that is in the least bit frightening or scary—no boogey-man, no shadow of death helping us into the bath. Adults are absent (and it is probably significant that in our strongest memories of childhood, adults usually *are* absent), but there is no sense of loss, of bewilderment. Instead we have the pure joy of being a child, caught in a world of nature from which we have not yet begun to feel separate.

There is a leader, though, and it is none other than “the great god Pan” (to borrow a line from Arthur Machen). Like our childhood memories, he appears indistinct at first, “the little | lame balloonman” (4-5). Of course he is limping, he is off in the distance, walking on his little goat feet. He becomes clearer as the poem progresses, first being “the queer | old baloonman” (11-12) and then “the | goat-footed | balloonMan” (19-21), and we feel ourselves slipping deeper and deeper into the myth as cummings uses first a lowercase “m” (balloonman) and then an upper-case “m” (balloonMan) to further delineate Pan’s presence.

As for the myth of childhood, cummings’ use of language plants us squarely in the middle of it. Children are not named individually, but rather “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel,” reflecting the intense friendships children often form, and in which they are inseparable. (Such a relationship in adulthood would be charitably described as “clingy” or “stalking.”)

Lastly, cummings uses strong nature imagery to firmly plant us in the middle of that myth. Spring is a time when the world is “mud-luscious,” when the world is “puddle-wonderful.” His words delineate a world we experience through our most basic, most primal, sense: that of touch.

“We can never be born enough” cummings tells us in the introduction to his *22 and 50 Poems* (11). If these poems tell us one thing about the mythology of childhood, it is that: we never can be born enough; we can never go back and relive our lives with the knowledge and

wisdom we have now. We go through life toward the future, hurtling toward it, and casting away childhood, Dionysian, knowledge and sensibilities as we accumulate adult, Apollonian, knowledge and sensibilities. As adults, we may curse the fact that we knew so little then (how many times have we heard someone say “I wish I knew then what I know now”?) and yet the one reassuring thing about these poems is that we go through childhood knowing just enough, without also realizing that there is more to know. But we also need what we have lost. If children are expected to “grow up,” the one thing these poems hint at—the one thing they shouldn’t cast aside—is that very Dionysian sense of wonder and imagination.

In a way, the Kinnell and cummings poems form a neat bookend to the Tobin poem. Tobin tells us that at some time, sooner, later, perhaps too soon, we must consider our own mortality. On one hand, we can live in a nice, Apollonian world, but eventually we must come to terms with the fact that we will end someday. On the other hand, Kinnell and cummings tell us that we can live in whichever world we like—Apollonian or Dionysian—and take great joy in the pleasure of being alive. If nothing else, these poems celebrate the pure joy of being alive. What more could we want?

Works Cited:

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