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THE

DISAPPEARANCE

OF

CHILDHOOD



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Chapter I

WHEN THERE WERE NO CHILDREN

As I write, twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls are among the highest-paid models in America. In advertisements in all the visual media, they are presented to the public in the guise of knowing and sexually enticing adults, entirely comfortable in the milieu of eroticism. After seeing such displays of soft core pornography, those of us not yet fully conditioned to the new American attitudes toward children yearn for the charm and seductive innocence of Lolita.

In cities and towns throughout the country the difference between adult crimes and children's crimes is rapidly narrowing; and in many states the punishments are becoming the same. Between 1950 and 1979 the rate of serious crime committed by those younger than fifteen has increased one hundred and ten times, or eleven thousand percent. Old-timers may wonder about what happened to "juvenile delinquency," and grow nostalgic about a time when a teen-ager who cut class to smoke a cigarette in the school lavatory was considered a "problem."

Old-timers will also remember when there existed an important difference between the clothing of children and adults.

Within the past decade the children's clothing industry has undergone such rapid change that for all practical purposes "children's clothing" has disappeared. It would appear that the idea put forward by Erasmus and then fully accepted in the eighteenth century—namely, that children and adults require different forms of dress—is now rejected by both classes of people.

Like distinctive forms of dress, children's games, once so visible on the streets of our towns and cities, are also disappearing. Even the idea of a children's game seems to be slipping from our grasp. A children's game, as we used to think of it, requires no instructors or umpires or spectators; it uses whatever space and equipment are at hand; it is played for no other reason than pleasure. But Little League baseball and Pee Wee football, for example, not only are supervised by adults but are modeled in every possible way on big league sports. Umpires are needed. Equipment is required. Adults cheer and jeer from the sidelines. It is not pleasure the players are seeking but reputation. Who has seen anyone over the age of nine playing Jacks, Johnny on the Pony, Blindman's Buff, or ball-bouncing rhymes? Peter and Iona Opie, the great English historians of children's games, have identified hundreds of traditional children's games, almost none of which are presently played with any regularity by American children. Even Hide-and-Seek, which was played in Periclean Athens more than two thousand years ago, has now almost completely disappeared from the repertoire of self-organized children's amusements.¹ Children's games, in a phrase, are an endangered species.

As, indeed, is childhood itself. Everywhere one looks, it may be seen that the behavior, language, attitudes, and desires—even the physical appearance—of adults and children are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. No doubt this is why there exists a growing movement to recast the legal rights of children so that they are more or less the same as adults'. (See, for example, Richard Farson's book *Birth-*

rights.) The thrust of this movement, which, among other things, is opposed to compulsory schooling, resides in the claim that what has been thought to be a preferred status for children is instead only an oppression that keeps them from fully participating in society.

I will discuss later the evidence supporting the view that childhood is disappearing, but I want to note here that of all such evidence none is more suggestive than the fact that the history of childhood has now become a major industry among scholars. As if to confirm Marshall McLuhan's observation that when a social artifact becomes obsolete, it is turned into an object of nostalgia and contemplation, historians and social critics have produced, within the past two decades, scores of major works on childhood's history, whereas very few were written between, say, 1800 and 1960.² Indeed, it is probably fair to say that Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*, published in 1962, created the field and started the rush. Why now? At the very least we may say that the best histories of anything are produced when an event is completed, when a period is waning, when it is unlikely that a new and more robust phase will occur. Historians usually come not to praise but to bury. In any event, they find autopsies easier to do than progress reports.

But even if I am wrong in believing that the sudden preoccupation with recording the history of childhood is, by itself, a sign of the waning of childhood, we can at least be grateful for having available, at long last, accounts of where childhood comes from. Such accounts make it possible for us to learn why an idea like childhood was conceived, and to make conjectures as to why it should become obsolete. What follows, then, is the story of childhood as a careful reader of much of the available material can best piece it together.

Of the attitudes toward children in antiquity, we know very little. The Greeks, for example, paid scant attention to childhood as a special age category, and the old adage that the Greeks had a word for everything does not apply to the con-

cept of a child. Their words for *child* and *youth* are, at the very least, ambiguous, and seem to include almost anyone between infancy and old age. Although none of their paintings have survived, it is unlikely that the Greeks thought it worthwhile to portray children in them. We know, of course, that among their surviving statues, none is of a child.³

There are references in their voluminous literature to what we might call children, but these are clouded by ambiguity, so that one cannot get a sure view of the Greek conception, such as it was, of a child. For example, Xenophon tells of the relationship of a man to his young wife. She is not yet fifteen and has been brought up properly "to see as little, and hear as little, and ask as few questions as possible." But since she also reveals that she has been told by her mother that she is of no consequence and that only her husband matters, we cannot clearly judge if we are learning about the Greek attitude toward females or toward children. We do know that among the Greeks as late as Aristotle's time, there were no moral or legal restraints against the practice of infanticide. Although Aristotle believed there should be limits set upon this ghastly tradition, he raised no strong objections to it.⁴ From this we may assume that the Greek view of the meaning of a child's life was drastically different from our own. But even this assumption fails on occasion. Herodotus tells several stories that suggest an attitude recognizable to the modern mind. In one such story, ten Corinthians go to a house for the purpose of killing a little boy who, according to an oracle, would grow up to destroy their city. When they arrive at the house, the mother, thinking they are making a friendly visit, places the boy in the arms of one of the men. The boy smiles and, as we would say, captures the hearts of the men, who then leave without performing their dreadful mission. It is not clear how old the boy is, but he is obviously young enough to be held in the arms of an adult. Perhaps if he had been as old as eight or nine, the men would have had no trouble in doing what they came for.

One thing, however, is clear enough. Though the Greeks may have been ambivalent, even confused (by our standards), about the nature of childhood, they were single-mindedly passionate about education. The greatest Athenian philosopher, Plato, wrote extensively on the subject, including no less than three different proposals on how the education of youth ought to be conducted. Moreover, some of his most memorable dialogues are discussions of such questions as whether or not virtue and courage can be taught. (He believed they can.) There can be no doubt that the Greeks invented the idea of school. Their word for it meant "leisure," reflecting a characteristic Athenian belief that at leisure a civilized person would naturally spend his time thinking and learning. Even the ferocious Spartans, who were not strong on what their neighbors would call thinking and learning, established schools. According to Plutarch's life of Lycurgus in the *Lives*, the Spartans enrolled seven-year-old males in classes where they did exercises and played together. They also were taught some reading and writing. "Just enough," Plutarch tells us, "to serve their turn."

As for the Athenians, as is well known, they established a great variety of schools, some of which became vehicles for the spread of Greek culture to many parts of the world. There were their gymnasiums, their ephebic colleges, their schools of the rhetor, and even elementary schools, in which reading and arithmetic were taught. And even though the ages of the young scholars—let us say, at elementary school—were more advanced than we might expect (many Greek boys did not learn to read until adolescence), wherever there are schools, there is consciousness, in some degree, of the specialness of the young.

Nonetheless, the Greek preoccupation with school must not be taken to mean that their conception of childhood parallels our own. Even if we exclude the Spartans, whose methods of discipline, for example, would be regarded by the modern mind as torture, the Greeks did not approach the

disciplining of the young with the same measure of empathy and understanding considered normal by moderns. "The evidence which I have collected on methods of disciplining children," notes Lloyd deMause, "leads me to believe that a very large percentage of the children prior to the eighteenth century were what would today be termed 'battered children.'"⁵ Indeed, deMause conjectures that a "hundred generations of mothers" impassively watched their infants and children suffer from one source of discomfort or another because the mothers (and, emphatically, the fathers) lacked the psychic mechanism necessary to empathize with children.⁶ He is probably correct in this conjecture. There are certainly parents living today who do not have the capacity to empathize with children, and this after four hundred years of child-consciousness. It is, therefore, entirely plausible that when Plato speaks in *Protagoras* of straightening disobedient children by "threats and blows, like a piece of warped wood," we may believe that this is a considerably more primitive version of the traditional warning that if we spare the rod, we will spoil the child. We may also believe that for all their schools, and for all their concern to impart virtue to youth, the ancient Greeks would be mystified by the idea of child psychology or, for that matter, child nurturing.

After saying all of this, I think it fair to conclude that the Greeks gave us a foreshadowing of the idea of childhood. As with so many ideas we take for granted as part of a civilized mentality, we are indebted to the Greeks for this contribution. They did not quite invent childhood, but they came close enough so that two thousand years later, when it *was* invented, we were able to recognize its roots.

The Romans, of course, borrowed the Greek notion of schooling and even developed an awareness of childhood that surpassed the Greek idea. Roman art, for example, reveals "a quite extraordinary sense of age, of the young and growing child, which was not to be found again in Western art until Renaissance times."⁷ Moreover, the Romans began to make

a connection, taken for granted by moderns, between the growing child and the idea of shame. This was a crucial step in the evolution of the idea of childhood, and I shall have occasion to refer to this connection in discussing the decline of childhood in both medieval Europe and our own times. The point is, simply, that *without a well-developed idea of shame, childhood cannot exist*. To their everlasting credit, the Romans grasped this point, although, apparently, not all of them and not enough of them. In an extraordinary passage in his discussion of education, Quintilian reproaches his peers for their shame-less behavior in the presence of noble Roman children:

We rejoice if they say something over-free, and words which we should not tolerate from the lips even of an Alexandrian page are greeted with laughter and a kiss. . . . they hear us use such words, they see our mistresses and minions; every dinner party is loud with foul songs, and things are presented to their eyes of which we should blush to speak.⁸

Here we are confronted with an entirely modern view, one that defines childhood, in part, by claiming for it the need to be sheltered from adult secrets, particularly sexual secrets. Quintilian's reproach to adults who neglect to keep these secrets from the young provides a perfect illustration of an attitude that Norbert Elias in his great book *The Civilizing Process* claims as a feature of our civilized culture: that the sexual drive is subjected to strict controls, that great pressure is placed on adults to privatize all their impulses (particularly sexual ones), and that a "conspiracy of silence" concerning sexual urges is maintained in the presence of the young.⁹

Of course, Quintilian was a teacher of oratory and rhetoric, and in the work by which we best know him, he gives an account of how to educate a great orator, beginning in infancy. Thus, we may assume that he was far more advanced

than most of his contemporaries in his sensitivity to the special features of the young. Nonetheless, there is a traceable line between the sentiment expressed by Quintilian and the first known law prohibiting infanticide. That law does not come until A.D. 374, three centuries after Quintilian.¹⁰ But it is an extension of the idea that children require protection and nurturing, and schooling, and freedom from adult secrets.

And then, after the Romans, all such ideas disappear.

Every educated person knows about the invasions of the northern barbarians, the collapse of the Roman empire, the shrouding of classical culture, and Europe's descent into what is called the Dark and then the Middle Ages. Our textbooks cover the transformation well enough except for four points that are often overlooked and that are particularly relevant to the story of childhood. The first is that literacy disappears. The second is that education disappears. The third is that shame disappears. And the fourth, as a consequence of the other three, is that childhood disappears. To understand that consequence, we must examine in some detail the first three developments.

Why literacy should have disappeared is as deep a mystery as any of the unknowns concerning the millennium that spans the fall of Rome and the invention of the printing press. However, the question becomes approachable if put in a form similar to the way it is posed by Eric Havelock in his *Origins of Western Literacy*. "Why . . . after the fall of Rome," he asks, "did it come about that the use of the Roman alphabet contracted to the point where the general population ceased to read and write so that a previous socialized literacy reverted to a condition of virtual craft literacy, once more reversing history?"¹¹ What is so useful about Havelock's question is his distinction between "social literacy" and "craft literacy." By social literacy he means a condition where most people can and do read. By craft literacy he means a condition where the art of reading is restricted to a few who form

a "scribal" and, therefore, a privileged class. In other words, if we define a literate culture not on the basis of its having a writing system but on the basis of how many people can read it, and how easily, then the question of why literacy declined permits some plausible conjectures.

One of them is given by Havelock himself, who indicates how, during the Dark and Middle Ages, the styles of writing the letters of the alphabet multiplied, the shapes becoming elaborated and disguised. The Europeans, it would appear, forgot that recognition, which was the Greek word for reading, must be swift and automatic if reading is to be a pervasive practice. The shapes of letters must be, so to speak, transparent, for among the marvelous features of alphabetic writing is that once the letters have been learned, one need not think about them. They disappear psychologically, and do not interpose themselves as an object of thought between the reader and his recollection of spoken language. If calligraphy calls attention to itself, or is ambiguous, the essential idea of literacy is lost, or, to be more accurate, is lost to the majority of people. Havelock writes: "Calligraphic virtuosity of any kind fosters craft literacy and is fostered by it, but is the enemy of social literacy. The unlucky careers of both the Greek and Roman versions of the alphabet during the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages sufficiently demonstrate this fact."¹² What happened in Europe—to put it simply—is not that the alphabet disappeared but that the readers' capacities to interpret it disappeared. To quote Havelock again: "Europe, in effect, reverts for a time to a condition of readership analogous to that which obtained in the pre-Greek Mesopotamian cultures."¹³

Still another explanation for the loss of literacy, by no means contradictory to the first, is that the sources of papyrus and parchment became scarce; or if not that, then that the severity of life did not allow for the energy to manufacture them. We know that paper did not come to medieval Europe until the thirteenth century, at which time the Europeans be-

gan at once to manufacture it, not in the time-honored way—by hand and foot—but by water-powered mills.¹⁴ It is surely no accident that the beginnings of the great medieval universities and a corresponding renewed interest in literacy coincide with the introduction and manufacture of paper. It is, therefore, quite plausible that the scarcity of writing surfaces for several hundred years created a situation inimical to social literacy.

We may also conjecture that the Roman Church was not insensible to the advantages of craft literacy as a means of keeping control over a large and diverse population; that is to say, of keeping control over the ideas, organization, and loyalties of a large and diverse population. Certainly it would have been in the interests of the Church to encourage a more restricted access to literacy, to have its clerics form a scribal class that alone would have access to theological and intellectual secrets.

But whatever the reasons, there can be no doubt that social literacy disappeared for close to a thousand years; and nothing can convey better the sense of what that means than the image of a medieval reader tortuously working on a text. With few exceptions, medieval readers, regardless of age, did not and could not read as we do. If such a person could have seen a modern reader whisk through a page, silently, eyes rapidly moving, lips in repose, he might have interpreted it as an act of magic. The typical medieval reader proceeded something like one of our own recalcitrant first graders: word by word, muttering to himself, pronouncing aloud, finger pointed at each word, hardly expecting any of it to make much sense.¹⁵ And here I am referring to those who were scholars. Most people did not read at all.

What this meant is that all important social interactions were conducted through oral means, face-to-face. In the Middle Ages, Barbara Tuchman tells us, "The average layman acquired knowledge mainly by ear, through public sermons, mystery plays, and the recital of narrative poems, ballads,

and tales."¹⁶ Thus, Europe returned to a "natural" condition of human communication, dominated by talk and reinforced by song. For almost all of our history, that is the way human beings have conducted their affairs and created culture. After all, as Havelock has reminded us, biologically we are all oralists. Our genes are programmed for spoken language. Literacy, on the other hand, is a product of cultural conditioning.¹⁷ To this, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great advocate of the noble savage, would readily agree, and he would add that if men are to live as close to nature as possible, they must despise books and reading. In *Émile* he tells us that "reading is the scourge of childhood, for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about."

Rousseau is, I believe, correct, if one may take him to mean that reading is the end of *permanent* childhood and that it undermines both the psychology and sociology of oralism. Because reading makes it possible to enter a non-observed and abstract world of knowledge, it creates a split between those who cannot read and those who can. Reading is the scourge of childhood because, in a sense, it creates adulthood. Literature of all kinds—including maps, charts, contracts, and deeds—collects and keeps valuable secrets. Thus, in a literate world to be an adult implies having access to cultural secrets codified in unnatural symbols. In a literate world children must *become* adults. But in a nonliterate world there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult, for there are few secrets, and the culture does not need to provide training in how to understand itself.

That is why, as Ms. Tuchman also notes, medieval behavior was characterized by childishness among all age groups.¹⁸ In an oral world there is not much of a concept of an adult and, therefore, even less of a child. And that is why, in all the sources, one finds that in the Middle Ages childhood ended at age seven. Why seven? *Because that is the age at which children have command over speech.* They can say and understand what adults can say and understand. They are able to

know all the secrets of the tongue, which are the only secrets they need to know. And this helps us to explain why the Catholic Church designated age seven as the age at which one was assumed to know the difference between right and wrong, the age of reason. It also helps us to explain why, until the seventeenth century, the words used to denote young males could refer to men of thirty, forty, or fifty, for there was no word—in French, German, or English—for a young male between the ages of seven and sixteen. The word *child* expressed kinship, not an age.¹⁹ But most of all, the oralism of the Middle Ages helps us to explain why there were no primary schools. For where biology determines communication competence, there is no need for such schools.

Of course, schools are not unknown in the Middle Ages, some of them associated with the Church, some of them private. But the complete absence of the idea of a primary education to teach reading and writing and to provide a foundation for further learning proves the absence of a concept of a literate education. The medieval way of learning is the way of the oralist; it occurs essentially through apprenticeship and service—what we would call “on-the-job training.” Such schools as existed were characterized by a “lack of gradation in the curricula according to the difficulty of the subject matter, the simultaneity with which subjects were taught, the mixing of the ages, and the liberty of the pupils.”²⁰ If a medieval child got to school, he would have begun as late as age ten, probably later. He would have lived on his own in lodgings in the town, far from his family. It would have been common for him to find in his class adults of all ages, and he would not have perceived himself as different from them. He certainly would not have found any correspondence between the ages of students and what they studied. There would have been constant repetition in the lectures, since new students were continuously arriving and would not have heard what the Master had said previously. There were, of course, no females present, and as soon as the

students were loosed from the discipline of the classroom, they would have been free to do whatever they wished on the outside.

What we can say, then, with certainty, is that in the medieval world there was no conception of child development, no conception of prerequisites or sequential learning, no conception of schooling as a preparation for an adult world. As Ariès sums it up: “Medieval civilization had forgotten the *paideia* of the ancients and knew nothing as yet of modern education. That is the main point: *It had no idea of education* [italics mine].”²¹

Neither, one must add at once, did it have a concept of shame, at least as a modern would understand it. The idea of shame rests, in part, on secrets, as Quintilian knew. One might say that one of the main differences between an adult and a child is that the adult knows about certain facets of life—its mysteries, its contradictions, its violence, its tragedies—that are not considered suitable for children to know; that are, indeed, shameful to reveal to them indiscriminately. In the modern world, as children move toward adulthood, we reveal these secrets to them, in what we believe to be a psychologically assimilable way. But such an idea is possible only in a culture in which there is a sharp distinction between the adult world and the child’s world, and where there are institutions that express that difference. The medieval world made no such distinction and had no such institutions.

Immersed in an oral world, living in the same social sphere as adults, unrestrained by segregating institutions, the medieval child would have had access to almost all of the forms of behavior common to the culture. The seven-year-old male was a man in every respect except for his capacity to make love and war.²² “Certainly,” J. H. Plumb writes, “there was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart. The coarse village festival depicted by Brueghel, showing men and women besotted

with drink, groping for each other with unbridled lust, have children eating and drinking with the adults."²³

Brueghel's paintings, in fact, show us two things at once: the inability and unwillingness of the culture to hide anything from children, which is one part of the idea of shame, and the absence of what became known in the sixteenth century as *civilité*, which is the other part. There did not exist a rich content of formal behavior for youth to learn. How impoverished that content was in the Middle Ages may be difficult for moderns to grasp. Erasmus, writing as late as 1523, gives us a vivid image of a German inn in his *Diversoria*: There are eighty to ninety people sitting together. They are of all social classes and all ages. Someone is washing clothes, which he hangs to dry on the stove. Another is cleaning his boots on the table. There is a common bowl for washing one's hands, but the water in it is filthy. The smell of garlic and other odors is everywhere. Spitting is frequent and unrestricted as to its destination. Everyone is sweating, for the room is overheated. Some wipe their noses on their clothing, and do not turn away when doing it. When the meal is brought in, each person dips his bread into the general dish, takes a bite, and dips again. There are no forks. Each takes the meat with his hands from the same dish, drinks wine from the same goblet, and sips soup from the same bowl.²⁴

In order to understand how people could have endured this—indeed, not even noticed it—we must understand, as Norbert Elias reminds us, that "such people stood in a different relationship to one another than we do. And this involves not only the level of clear, rational consciousness; their emotional life also had a different structure and character."²⁵ They did not, for example, have the same concept of private space as we do; they were not repelled by certain human odors or bodily functions; they were not shamed by exposing their own bodily functions to the gaze of others; they felt no disgust in making contact with the hands and mouths of others. Considering this, we will not be surprised to know that in the

Middle Ages there is no evidence for toilet training in the earliest months of the infant's life.²⁶ And we will perhaps expect, as was the case, that there was no reluctance to discuss sexual matters in the presence of children. The idea of concealing sexual drives was alien to adults, and the idea of sheltering children from sexual secrets, unknown. "Everything was permitted in their presence: coarse language, scabrous actions and situations; they had heard everything and seen everything."²⁷ Indeed, it was common enough in the Middle Ages for adults to take liberties with the sexual organs of children. To the medieval mind such practices were merely ribald amusements. As Ariès remarks: "The practice of playing with children's privy parts formed part of a widespread tradition. . . ."²⁸ Today, that tradition will get you up to thirty years in prison.

The absence of literacy, the absence of the idea of education, the absence of the idea of shame—these are the reasons why the idea of childhood did not exist in the medieval world. Of course, we must include in the story not only the severity of life but in particular the high rate of mortality among children. In part because of children's inability to survive, adults did not, and could not, have the emotional commitment to them that we accept as normal. The prevailing view was to have many children in the hope that two or three might survive. On these grounds, people obviously could not allow themselves to become too attached to the young. Ariès quotes from a document that records a remark made by the neighbor of a distraught mother of five children. In order to comfort the mother, the neighbor says, "Before they are old enough to bother you, you will have lost half of them, or perhaps all of them."²⁹

It is not until the late fourteenth century that children are even mentioned in wills and testaments, an indication that adults did not expect them to be around very long.³⁰ In fact, probably because of this, in some parts of Europe children were treated as neuter genders. In fourteenth-century Italy,

for example, the sex of a child who had died was never recorded.³¹ But I believe it would be a mistake to give too much importance to the high mortality rate of children as a way of explaining the absence of the *idea* of childhood. Half the people who died in London between 1730 and 1779 were under five years of age, and yet, by then, England had already developed the idea of childhood.³² And that is because, as I shall try to show in the next chapter, a new communication environment began to take form in the sixteenth century as a result of printing and social literacy. The printing press created a new definition of adulthood *based on reading competence*, and, correspondingly, a new conception of childhood *based on reading incompetence*. Prior to the coming of that new environment, infancy ended at seven and adulthood began at once. There was no intervening stage because none was needed. That is why prior to the sixteenth century there were no books on child-rearing, and exceedingly few about women in their role as mothers.³³ That is why the young were part of most ceremonies, including funeral processions, there being no reason to shield them from death. That is why there was no such thing as children's literature. Indeed, in literature "the chief role of children was to die, usually drowned, smothered, or abandoned. . . ."³⁴ That is why there were no books on pediatrics. And why paintings consistently portrayed children as miniature adults, for as soon as children abandoned swaddling clothes, they dressed exactly like other men and women of their social class. The language of adults and children was also the same. There are, for example, no references anywhere to children's jargon prior to the seventeenth century, after which they are numerous.³⁵ And that is why the majority of children did not go to school, for there was nothing of importance to teach them; most of them were sent away from home to do menial work or serve as apprentices.

In the medieval world, childhood is, in a word, invisible. Tuchman sums it up this way: "Of all the characteristics in

which the medieval age differs from the modern, none is so striking as the comparative absence of interest in children."³⁶

And then, without anyone's suspecting it, a goldsmith from Mainz, Germany, with the aid of an old winepress, gave birth to childhood.

Chapter 4

CHILDHOOD'S JOURNEY

Before we turn to those changes in our symbolic world that are leading to the disassembling of the idea of childhood, it is necessary to give a brief account of childhood's journey from the seventeenth century forward. When I speak about the disappearance of childhood, I am speaking about the disappearance of an idea. We may deepen our understanding of that idea, not to mention our sense of its loss, if we recall some of the obstacles it has faced and influences that have supported it.

For example, it must not be supposed that childhood sprang full grown from Gutenberg's press and the schoolmaster's class. It is true enough, as I have tried to show, that these were the essential events in childhood's formation in the modern world. But like any idea, especially one of worldwide significance, it has meant different things to different people at different times. As each nation tried to understand it and integrate it into its culture, childhood took on an aspect unique to the economic, religious, and intellectual setting in which it appeared. In some cases it was enriched; in some, neglected; in some, degraded. However, at no point did it disappear, although at times it came close enough.

For example, industrialization as developed in the eighteenth century was a constant and formidable enemy of childhood. In England, literacy, schooling, and childhood developed rapidly until the end of the seventeenth century. But with the growth of large industrial cities and the need for factory and mine workers, the special nature of children was subordinated to their utility as a source of cheap labor. "One effect of industrial capitalism," writes Lawrence Stone, "was . . . to add support for the penal and disciplinary aspects of school, which were seen by some largely as a system to break the will and to condition the child to routinized labour in the factory."¹ True enough, *if* the child was lucky enough to attend a school. For English society was particularly ferocious throughout the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth centuries in its treatment of the children of the poor, who were used to fuel the English industrial machine.

"I'm a trapper in the Gauber Pit, I have to trap without a light, and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half-past three in the morning and come out at five and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark: I dare not sing then." This is a description of a day in the mines by an eight-year-old girl, Sarah Gooder, in the mid-nineteenth century.² Sarah's revelations and those of other children led eventually to legislation prohibiting the employment of children in mines—that is to say, children under the age of ten!

Somewhat earlier, in 1814, legislation had been introduced that made stealing a child an indictable offense for the first time in English history. While it had been against the law to strip a stolen child of its clothes, there was no legal retribution for the act of actually stealing a child or for selling the child to beggars. But the law exhibited no such reluctance in exacting penalties for crimes committed by children. As late as 1780, children could be convicted for any of the more than two hundred crimes for which the penalty was hanging. A seven-year-old girl was hanged at Norwich for stealing a

petticoat, and after the Gordon Riots, several children were publicly hanged. "I never saw boys cry so much," said George Selwyn, a witness to the executions.³

In a trial held in 1761, Ann Martin was convicted of putting out the eyes of children with whom she then went begging about the country.⁴ She was sentenced to a mere two years in Newgate Prison, and most likely would not have been convicted at all if the children had been her own. Her crime, it would appear, consisted of damaging the property of others.

Volumes have been written, including several by Charles Dickens, that tell of the reign of terror visited upon the children of the poor from the eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth in England: the workhouses, the penal institutions, the textile mills, the mines, the illiteracy, the lack of schools. I choose the phrase "reign of terror" carefully, because it is important to say that just as the Reign of Terror in France did not and could not destroy the idea of political democracy, the brutal treatment of lower-class children did not and could not destroy the idea of childhood. Happily for the future, the idea was made of sterner stuff than were the children who never benefited from it.

There were several reasons why childhood survived the avarice of industrialized England, and one of them is that the middle and upper classes in England kept the idea alive, nurtured it, and extended it. This fact could not have been of the slightest interest or comfort to Sarah Gooder. But it is of significance to world civilization, and particularly to England. Once they had been introduced, the ideas and assumptions associated with childhood never left England; they were merely blocked from reaching a certain class of people. And although England paid a heavy price for this—for example, by remaining until recent times the most class-conscious society in the Western world—eventually childhood and all that it represents penetrated to the lower classes. After 1840, for example, the growth of elementary education was so rapid

that by the end of the nineteenth century, illiteracy had virtually been eliminated for all classes and for both men and women.⁵

Childhood was not the sort of idea that could be kept permanently from all segments of a population. Even if the English middle and upper classes tried hard to do so—and they did—childhood's development in other countries would have heavily influenced the course of events—and it did. Just as the idea of childhood crossed the Channel from England to Europe in the seventeenth century, it recrossed it from Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, by the late eighteenth century a causal connection between lack of education and crime among the young was taken for granted by most civilized people on the Continent, and a German visitor to England in 1824 remarked: "England, in which country alone there are annually executed more human beings than in several other countries taken together, suffers two millions of her people to walk about in utter ignorance."⁶ In 1833, *The Edinburgh Review* judged that as far as education was concerned throughout Europe, the English people were at the bottom of the scale, the Germans at the top.⁷ If not the Germans, then surely the Scots, who by the late eighteenth century had developed the largest elementary school system and perhaps the best secondary school system in Europe. The point is that the invention of childhood was an idea that crossed all national borders, occasionally being stopped and discouraged but always continuing on its journey. And while local conditions affected its aspect and progress, nothing could cause it to disappear. In France, for example, opposition to social literacy and education came not from an inhumane industrial capitalism but from Jesuits who feared the "protestantization" of their religion and culture. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, France had caught up with England in its literacy rate, in its schooling of the young, and therefore in its regard for the meaning of childhood.

The European-wide movement toward a humane conception

of childhood was due, in part, to a heightened sense of government responsibility for the welfare of children. It is important to take note of this fact because in recent years excessive government intervention in the lives of families has been attacked, and, in my opinion, justifiably so.⁸ But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in England and among the poorer classes, adults were not often in a position to develop or display the level of affection and commitment toward children that we would regard as normal. It may well be, as deMause has hypothesized, that many adults simply lacked the psychological mechanism by which they could feel tenderness toward children.⁹ It may also be that economic degradation effectively limits such feelings wherever they exist. In any case, it is well known that parents regularly treated their children not only as their private property to do with as they wished, but also as chattels whose well-being was expendable in the interests of family survival. In the eighteenth century the idea that the state had the right to act as a protector of children was both novel and radical. Nonetheless, gradually the total authority of parents was humanely modified, so that all social classes were forced into partnership with government in taking responsibility for child nurturing.

Why government began to assume such responsibility may be explained by reference to several forces, among which was a European-wide spirit of reform and learning. We must remember that the eighteenth century was the century of Goethe, of Voltaire, of Diderot, of Kant, of David Hume, of Edward Gibbon. It was also the century of Locke and Rousseau. We might even say that as far as childhood is concerned, in France the Jesuits were no match for Rousseau, as in England the industrial machine could not withstand the ideas of John Locke. By this I mean that the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century—the Enlightenment, as it is called—helped to nourish and spread the idea of childhood.

Locke, for example, exerted enormous influence on childhood's growth through his remarkable book *Some Thoughts*

Concerning Education, published in 1693. Like Erasmus before him, Locke saw the connections between book learning and childhood, and proposed an education that, while it treated the child as a precious resource, nonetheless demanded rigorous attention to the child's intellectual development and capacity for self-control. Even Locke's enlightened views on the nurturing of physical growth had as their purpose the development of a child's powers of reason. A child must have a vigorous body, he wrote, "so that it may be able to obey and execute the orders of the *mind* [his italics]." Locke also grasped the importance of shame as a means of maintaining the distinction between childhood and adulthood. "Esteem and disgrace are, of all others," he wrote, "the most powerful incentives to the mind, when once it is brought to relish them. If you can get into children a love of credit, and an apprehension of shame and disgrace, you have . . . put into 'em the true principle."

But most of all, Locke furthered the theory of childhood through his well-known idea that at birth the mind is a blank tablet, a *tabula rasa*. Thus, a heavy responsibility fell to parents and schoolmasters (and then, later, to government) for what is eventually written on the mind. An ignorant, shame-less, undisciplined child represented the failure of adults, not the child. Like Freud's ideas about psychic repression two hundred years later, Locke's *tabula rasa* created a sense of guilt in parents about their children's development, and provided the psychological and epistemological grounds for making the careful nurturing of children a national priority, at least among the merchant classes who were, so to say, Locke's constituents. And although Locke was no Horace Mann, in that his imagination did not admit of equal schooling for all children, he did propose a program of apprenticeships for the education of poor children whose minds, after all, were as malleable as those of the middle and upper classes.

A second great eighteenth-century intellectual influence on the idea of childhood was, of course, Rousseau. Although I

believe Rousseau did not clearly understand why childhood had arisen and how it might be maintained (whereas Locke did), he made two powerful contributions to its development. The first was in his insistence that the child is important in himself, not merely as a means to an end. In this he differed sharply from Locke, who saw the child at every point as a potential citizen and perhaps merchant. Rousseau's idea was not entirely original, for at the time Rousseau was writing, there already existed in France a certain reverence for the charm and value of childhood. Indeed, Rousseau himself quotes an old gentleman who, upon being asked by Louis XV whether he liked the eighteenth century better than the seventeenth, replied, "Sire, I spent my youth in reverence towards the old. I find myself compelled to spend my old age in reverence to the young." But Rousseau's power as a writer and his charismatic personality were so great that most of his followers even refused to believe, as Voltaire and other of his enemies revealed, that Rousseau had abandoned his own children to orphanages. Whatever his personal shortcomings may have been, Rousseau's writings aroused a curiosity about the nature of childhood that persists to the present day. We might fairly say that Friedrich Froebel, Johann Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Arnold Gesell, and A. S. Neill are all Rousseau's intellectual heirs. (Froebel and Pestalozzi explicitly proclaimed their debt.) Certainly their work proceeded from the assumption that the psychology of childhood is fundamentally different from that of adults, and is to be valued for itself.

Rousseau's second idea was that a child's intellectual and emotional life is important, not because we must know about it in order to teach and train our children, but because childhood is the stage of life when man most closely approximates to the "state of nature." Rousseau valued such a state to a degree that no one has since approached, including his intellectual heirs. In *Émile*, his famous book about the ideal education of a child, Rousseau allows only one book to be

read by children: *Robinson Crusoe*. And this only because the book demonstrates how man may live in and control a "natural environment." Rousseau's obsession with a state of nature and his corresponding contempt for "civilized values" brought to the world's attention, as no one had done before him, the childhood virtues of spontaneity, purity, strength, and joy, all of which came to be seen as features to nurture and celebrate. And the great artists of the Romantic movement did not fail to take up the "joie de vivre" of childhood as a theme. Wordsworth's poetry in particular depicts adults as "fallen children" and celebrates childhood innocence and naturalness. Wagner's *Siegfried* is often cited (for example, by Ariès) as the most powerful expression of the virtues of adolescence.¹⁰ And it is in the eighteenth century, we should remember, that Gainsborough painted the most romantic and charming picture of adolescence that has ever been done, his "Blue Boy."

And so as childhood moved into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as it crossed the Atlantic to the New World, there were two intellectual strains of which the idea was composed. We might call them the Lockean, or the Protestant, conception of childhood, and the Rousseauian, or the Romantic, conception. In the Protestant view the child is an unformed person who through literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame may be made into a civilized adult. In the Romantic view it is not the unformed child but the deformed adult who is the problem. The child possesses as his or her birthright capacities for candor, understanding, curiosity, and spontaneity that are deadened by literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame.

The difference between these two views can be seen most vividly by attending to the contrasting metaphors of childhood put forward by Locke and Rousseau. I do not believe it has been much remarked, for example, that Locke's metaphor of the mind as a tablet depicts precisely the connection between childhood and print. Indeed, the tabula rasa sees the child as

an inadequately written book, advancing toward maturity as the pages are filled. There is nothing "natural" or biological about this process. It is a process of symbolic development—sequential, segmented, linguistic. To Locke and most eighteenth-century thinkers, illiteracy and childhood were inseparable, adulthood being defined as total linguistic competence.

On the other hand, Rousseau wrote in *Émile* that "plants are improved by cultivation, and man by education." Here is the child as a wild plant, which can hardly be improved by book learning. Its growth is organic and natural; childhood requires only that it not be suffocated by civilization's diseased outpourings. To Rousseau, education was essentially a subtraction process; to Locke, an addition process. But whatever the differences between these two metaphors, they do have in common a concern for the future. Locke wanted education to result in a rich, varied, and copious book; Rousseau wanted education to result in a healthy flower. This is important to keep in mind, for a concern for the future is increasingly missing from the metaphors of childhood in the present day. Neither Locke nor Rousseau ever doubted that childhood could exist without the future-oriented guidance of adults.

In America, of course, the Protestant view dominated throughout much of the nineteenth century, although the Romantic view was never completely absent. Indeed, we might say that America's greatest book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, presents the case for the Romantic view, in spite of the book's somewhat ambiguous ending. Certainly Twain attacked the presumption that children are, in any but the most superficial sense, unformed. And he mocked the claim that their character may be vastly improved by society's "values." Huck's innate sense of fairness and dignity, his resourcefulness and psychological strength, his sheer *interest* in life—all of this struck a blow for the Romantic vision of childhood and was part of a general trend, beginning around the Civil War, toward a reassessment of the

nature of childhood. As Lawrence Cremin has shown in *The Transformation of the School*, the origins of the progressive education movement go back to this era. In 1857, for example, what eventually became known as the National Education Association was founded, and in 1875, a charter was issued to the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.¹¹ (As a matter of ironic contrast, we may ponder the fact that the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded nearly a decade earlier, in 1866.)

I do not mean to give the impression here, Huck Finn notwithstanding, that the Lockean view began to fall into disrepute, although this was probably the case for its more extreme Calvinist expression, i.e., that children are depraved. The tradition of Locke, after all, speaks for a high degree of caring and nurturing of children, and, above all, for the linguistic education of children. To this day, in America and throughout Europe, the assumptions of Locke are reflected not only in schools but in most of the institutions concerned with children. But what appears to have happened is that the *certainty* of opinion about the nature of childhood began to be questioned. In general, the Lockean view that children were unformed adults in need of civilizing remained intact, but questions arose as to how to proceed so as not to impair such childhood virtues as were depicted by Rousseau and the Romantic movement. In 1890, for example, the Society for the Study of Child Nature was established, and among the questions that were addressed at its meetings were the following:

- Should implicit obedience be enforced upon children?
- How can the true idea of property be conveyed to the child?
- How much authority should older children have?
- Is a child's imagination stunted if it is made to adhere strictly to the truth?¹²

The people who posed such questions were obviously no disciples of Rousseau, although just as obviously they did not wish the process of education to interfere with children's growth; that is to say, they accepted the idea that there is both a logic and psychology to childhood that must be respected.

Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the stage was set for two men whose work eventually established the mode of discourse to be used in all discussions of childhood in the present century. It is worth noting that the most influential book of each man was published in 1899, and each, in its way, led thoughtful people to pose the question: How do we balance the claims of civilization against the claims of a child's nature? I refer, of course, to Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and John Dewey's *The School and Society*. Both men and their work are too well known to require much explication, but this much must be said: Taken together, they represent a synthesis and summation of childhood's journey from the sixteenth century to the twentieth.

From within a framework of science Freud claimed, first of all, that there is an undeniable structure, as well as a special content, to the mind of the child—e.g., that children possess sexuality and are imbued with complexes and instinctive psychic drives. He also claimed that in their efforts to achieve mature adulthood, children must overcome, outgrow, and sublimate their instinctual passions. Freud thus refutes Locke and confirms Rousseau: the mind is not a tabula rasa; the child's mind does approximate a "state of nature"; to some extent the demands of nature must be taken into account or permanent personality dysfunctions will result. But at the same time, Freud refutes Rousseau and confirms Locke: the earliest interactions between child and parents are decisive in determining the kind of adult the child will be; through reason, the passions of the mind may be controlled; civilization is quite impossible without repression and sublimation.

In a similar way, although from a framework of philosophy,

Dewey argued that the psychic needs of the child must be addressed in terms of what the child is, not what the child will be. At home and in school adults must ask, What does the child need *now*? What problems must he or she solve *now*? Only in this way, Dewey believed, will the child become a constructive participant in the social life of the community. "If we identify ourselves with the real instincts and needs of childhood," he wrote, "and [require] only [their] fullest assertion and growth . . . discipline and culture of adult life shall all come in their due season."¹³

Freud and Dewey crystallized the basic paradigm of childhood that had been forming since the printing press: the child as schoolboy or schoolgirl whose self and individuality must be preserved by nurturing, whose capacity for self-control, deferred gratification, and logical thought must be extended, whose knowledge of life must be under the control of adults. Yet at the same time, the child is understood as having its own rules for development, and a charm, curiosity, and exuberance that must not be strangled—indeed, is strangled—at the risk of losing mature adulthood.

All of the psychological research on childhood that has been done in this century—for example, by Jean Piaget, Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, Jerome Bruner, or Lawrence Kohlberg—has been mere commentary on the basic childhood paradigm. No one has disputed that children are different from adults. No one has disputed that children must *achieve* adulthood. No one has disputed that the responsibility for the growth of children lies with adults. In fact, no one has disputed that there is a sense in which adults are at their best, their most civilized, when tending to the nurture of children. For we must remember that the modern paradigm of childhood is also the modern paradigm of adulthood. In saying what we wish a child to become, we are saying what we are. One might go so far as to claim that to the extent that there has been any growth in empathy and sensibility—in simple humaneness—in Western civilization, it has followed the path of the growth

of childhood. Four hundred years of our history refutes W. C. Fields's remark that he who hates children can't be all bad. Of course, one mustn't be unfair to a great comedian. The remark was intended as a joke, deriving its point from a malevolent irony. One wonders how Fields would make the joke today as childhood slips from our grasp.

PART 2

The

Disappearance

of

Childhood

a drawer or placed on a high shelf, out of the reach of children: its physical form, no less than its symbolic form, does not lend itself to exclusivity.

We may conclude, then, that television erodes the dividing line between childhood and adulthood in three ways, all having to do with its undifferentiated accessibility: first, because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second, because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behavior; and third, because it does not segregate its audience. With the assistance of other electric, nonprint media, television recreates the conditions of communication that existed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Biologically we are all equipped to see and interpret images and to hear such language as may be necessary to provide a context for most of these images. The new media environment that is emerging provides everyone, simultaneously, with the same information. Given the conditions I have described, electric media find it impossible to withhold any secrets. Without secrets, of course, there can be no such thing as childhood.

Chapter 6

THE TOTAL DISCLOSURE MEDIUM

Vidal Sassoon is a famous hairdresser who, for a while, had his own television show—a mixture of beauty hints, diet information, celebrity adoration, and popular psychology. As he came to the end of one segment of one of his programs, the theme music came up and Sassoon just had time enough to say, “Don’t go away. We’ll be back with a marvelous new diet and, then, a quick look at incest.”

Phil Donahue, as of this writing, has a television show that appears five times a week. He is a serious and responsible person who apparently believes that any subject can be—indeed, ought to be—“treated” on television. But even if he did not believe this, he would do so anyway: five shows a week, an hour a day, fifty-two weeks each year, leave little room for squeamishness, selectivity, or even old-fashioned embarrassment. After one has “treated” the defense budget, the energy crisis, the women’s movement, and crime in the streets, one inevitably must turn, whether quickly or slowly, to incest, promiscuity, homosexuality, sadomasochism, terminal illness, and other secrets of adult life. One may even turn to a kind of psychic striptease: the Stanley Siegel show, for example, regularly featured a segment in which its high-

strung host reclined on a couch while a psychiatrist "analyzed" his feelings about his parents, his sexuality, and his precarious sense of personal identity.

For the moment, we must set aside the question of television's trivialization of culture. (What, for example, would Sophocles make of anyone's attempt to take a "quick look" at incest? What would Freud make of psychoanalysis being used as a vaudeville act?) There is a prior question that must be addressed: Why is television forcing the entire culture to come out of the closet? Why has the subject matter of the psychiatrist's couch and the Confessional Box come so unashamedly into the public domain?

The answer, I think, is obvious, although, to be sure, there are those who obscure it by pressing on us naïve theories about the malevolence of television executives. The plain facts are that television operates virtually around the clock, that both its physical and symbolic form make it unnecessary—in fact, impossible—to segregate its audience, and that it requires a continuous supply of novel and interesting information to engage and hold that audience. Thus, television must make use of every existing taboo in the culture. Whether the taboo is revealed on a talk show, made into a theme for a soap opera or situation comedy, or exposed in a commercial is largely irrelevant. Television needs material. And it needs it in a way quite different from other media. Television is not only a pictorial medium, it is a present-centered and speed-of-light medium. The bias and therefore the business of television is to *move* information, not collect it. Television cannot dwell upon a subject or explore it deeply, an activity for which the static, lineal form of typography is well suited. There may, for example, be fifty books on the history of Argentina, five hundred on childhood, five thousand on the Civil War. If television has anything to do with these subjects, it will do it once, and then move on. This is why television has become the principal generator of what Daniel Boorstin calls the "pseudo-event," by which he means events that are staged for public

consumption.¹ The Academy Awards, the Miss America Contest, the "roasts" of celebrities, the Annual Country Music Association Awards, the battles of the network stars, press conferences, and the like exist because of television's need for material, not reality's. Television does not record these events; it creates them. And it does so not because television executives lack imagination but because they have an abundance of it. They know that television creates an insatiable need in its audience for novelty and public disclosure and that the dynamic visual imagery of television is not for the specialist, the researcher, or, indeed, for anyone wishing to practice analytic activity. To use a metaphor favored by Dorothy Singer, Jerome Singer, and Diana Zuckerman, watching television is like attending a party populated by people whom you do not know.² Every few seconds you are introduced to a new person as you move through the room. The general effect is one of excitement, but in the end it is hard to remember the names of the guests or what they said or even why they were there. It is of no importance that you do, in any case. Tomorrow there will be another party. To this image must be added the fact that you will be induced to return by the promise not only of new guests to meet but of the possibility that each of them will disclose a secret of some considerable interest. In other words: Don't go away. Tomorrow we'll take a quick look at incest.

As long as the present system of competitive, commercial broadcasting exists, this situation will persist. One suspects that if every network executive and program director were replaced tomorrow by, say, the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School, television programming would in the long run remain quite close to what it is.³

Like alphabetic writing and the printed book, television opens secrets, makes public what has previously been private.⁴ But unlike writing and printing, television has no way to close things down. The great paradox of literacy was that as it made secrets accessible, it simultaneously created an ob-

stacle to their availability. One must *qualify* for the deeper mysteries of the printed page by submitting oneself to the rigors of a scholastic education. One must progress slowly, sequentially, even painfully, as the capacity for self-restraint and conceptual thinking is both enriched and expanded. I vividly remember being told as a thirteen-year-old of the existence of a book, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, that, I was assured, was required reading for all who wanted to know sexual secrets. But the problems that needed to be solved to have access to it were formidable. For one, it was hard to find. For another, it cost money. For still another, it had to be *read*. Much of it, therefore, was not understandable to me, and even the special passages to which my attention was drawn by a thoughtful previous reader who underlined them required acts of imagination that my experience could not always generate.

Television, by contrast, is an open-admission technology to which there are no physical, economic, cognitive, or imaginative restraints. The six-year-old and the sixty-year-old are equally qualified to experience what television has to offer. Television, in this sense, is the consummate egalitarian medium of communication, surpassing oral language itself. For in speaking, we may always whisper so that the children will not hear. Or we may use words they may not understand. But television cannot whisper, and its pictures are both concrete and self-explanatory. The children see everything it shows.

The most obvious and general effect of this situation is to eliminate the exclusivity of worldly knowledge and, therefore, to eliminate one of the principal differences between childhood and adulthood. This effect follows from a fundamental principle of social structure: A group is largely defined by the exclusivity of the information its members share. If everyone knew what lawyers know, there would be no lawyers. If students knew what their teachers know, there would be no need to differentiate between them. Indeed, if fifth graders

knew what eighth graders know, there would be no point to having grades at all. G. B. Shaw once remarked that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. We might broaden this idea to say that any group is a "conspiracy" against those who are not in it by virtue of the fact that, for one reason or another, the "outs" do not have access to the information possessed by the "ins."

Of course, not every instance of role differentiation or group identity rests on access to information. Biology, for example, will determine who will be a male and who a female.⁵ But in most instances social role is formed by the conditions of a particular information environment, and this is most certainly the case with the social category of childhood. Children are a group of people who do *not* know certain things that adults know. In the Middle Ages there were no children because there existed no means for adults to know exclusive information. In the Age of Gutenberg, such a means developed. In the Age of Television, it is dissolved.

This means more than that childhood "innocence" is lost, a phrase that tends to imply only a diminution of childhood's charm. With the electric media's rapid and egalitarian disclosure of the total content of the adult world, several profound consequences result. First, the idea of shame is diluted and demystified. So that the meaning I am giving to shame may be clearer, it is necessary to introduce a particularly relevant remark by G. K. Chesterton. "All healthy men," he observed, "ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, know that there is a certain fury in sex that we cannot afford to inflame and that a certain mystery and awe must ever surround it if we are to remain sane."

Although Chesterton is here talking about sexual impulses, his point has a wider meaning, and is, I think, a fair summary of Freud's and Elias's views on the civilizing process. Civilization cannot exist without the control of impulses, particularly the impulse toward aggression and immediate gratification. We are in constant danger of being possessed by barbarism,

of being overrun by violence, promiscuity, instinct, egoism. Shame is the mechanism by which barbarism is held at bay, and much of its power comes, as Chesterton holds, from the mystery and awe that surround various acts. Included among these acts are thoughts and words, all of which are made mysterious and awesome by the fact that they are constantly hidden from public view. By hiding them, we make them mysterious; by making them mysterious, we regulate them. In some cases, adults may not even display their knowledge of such secrets to each other and must find relief in the psychiatrist's office or the Confessional Box. But in all cases it is necessary to control the extent to which children are aware of such matters. Certainly since the Middle Ages it has been commonly believed that the impulse toward violence, sexuality, and egoism is of particular danger to children, who, it is assumed, are not yet sufficiently governed by self-restraint. Therefore, the inculcation of feelings of shame has constituted a rich and delicate part of a child's formal and informal education. Children, in other words, are immersed in a world of secrets, surrounded by mystery and awe; a world that will be made intelligible to them by adults who will teach them, in stages, how shame is transformed into a set of moral directives. From the child's point of view, shame gives power and authority to adulthood. For adults know, whereas children do not, what words are shameful to use, what subjects are shameful to discuss, what acts are deemed necessary to privatize.

I should like to be especially clear on this point. I do not argue that the content of shame is created by the information structure of society. The roots of shame lie elsewhere, go very deep into the history and fears of a people, and are far beyond the scope and point of this book. I am, however, claiming that shame cannot exert any influence as a means of social control or role differentiation in a society that cannot keep secrets. If one lived in a society in which the law required people to be nude on public beaches, the shame in revealing certain parts of the body would quickly disappear. For clothing is a means

of keeping a secret, and if we are deprived of the means of keeping a secret, we are deprived of the secret. Similarly, the shameful in incest, in violence, in homosexuality, in mental illness, disappears when the means of concealing them disappears, when their details become the content of public discourse, available for examination by everyone in a public arena. What was once shameful may become a "social problem" or a "political issue" or a "psychological phenomenon," but in the process it must lose its dark and fugitive character, as well as some of its moral force.

It is an oversimplification to argue, as do representatives of the Moral Majority, that such a situation necessarily and categorically signifies cultural degeneration. It is well to remember that different cultures form different taboos, and what is shameful in one often appears arbitrary to another. We also have reason to hope that the transformation of shameful behavior into "social problems" or "alternate life-styles" through public disclosure and consequent rationalization may, in some notable instances, represent a step toward a more humane sensitivity. Certainly it would be hard to defend the proposition that a healthy society demands that death, mental illness, and homosexuality remain dark and mysterious secrets. And it would be even less defensible to argue that adults ought not to approach these subjects in any but the most restricted circumstances. But that the opening of these subjects to all, in unbound circumstances, poses dangers and in particular makes the future of childhood problematic must be boldly faced. For if there are no dark and fugitive mysteries for adults to conceal from children, and then reveal to them as they think necessary, safe, and proper, then surely the dividing line between adults and children becomes dangerously thin. We have here, in other words, a Faustian bargain, and it is very sad to note that the only sizable group in the body politic that has so far grasped the point is that benighted movement known as the Moral Majority. For through them the question has been raised, What is the price of openness and candor?

There are many answers to that question, most of which we do not know. But it is clear that if we turn over to children a vast store of powerful adult material, childhood cannot survive. By definition adulthood means mysteries solved and secrets uncovered. If from the start the children know the mysteries and the secrets, how shall we tell them apart from anyone else?

With the gradual decline of shame there is, of course, a corresponding diminution in the significance of manners. As shame is the psychological mechanism that overcomes impulse, manners are the exterior social expression of the same conquest. Everything from table manners to language manners to the manners of dress is intended to reveal the extent to which one has learned self-restraint; and it is at the same time a means of teaching self-restraint. As already noted, manners or civilité did not begin to emerge in elaborated forms among the mass of people until after the printing press, in large measure because literacy both demanded and promoted a high degree of self-control and delayed gratification. Manners, one might say, are a social analogue to literacy. Both require a submission of body to mind. Both require a fairly long developmental learning process. Both require intensive adult teaching. As literacy creates a hierarchical intellectual order, manners create a hierarchical social order. Children must earn adulthood by becoming both literate and well-mannered. But in an information environment in which literacy loses force as a metaphor of the structure of human development, the importance of manners must decline. The new media make distinctions among age groups appear invidious, and thus are hostile to the idea of a hierarchical social order.

Consider, for example, the case of language manners. Within recent memory adults did not use certain words in the presence of children, who, in turn, were not expected to use them in the presence of adults. The question of whether or not children knew such words from other contexts was beside the point. Social propriety required that a public distinction

be maintained between an adult's symbolic world and the child's. This custom, unknown in the Middle Ages, represented more than a pleasant social fiction. Linguistic restraint on the adult's part reflected a social ideal, i.e., a disposition to protect children from the harsh, sordid, or cynical attitudes so often implicit in brutal or obscene language. On the children's part, restraint reflected an understanding of their place in the social hierarchy, and in particular, the understanding that they were not yet entitled to the public expression of such attitudes. But, of course, with the blurring of role distinctions such linguistic deference loses its point. Today, this custom has so rapidly eroded that those who practice it are considered " quaint." It would appear that we are moving back toward a fourteenth-century situation where no words were considered unfit for a youthful ear.

In the face of all this, both the authority of adulthood and the curiosity of childhood lose ground. For like shame and manners they are rooted in the idea of secrets. Children are curious because they do not yet know what they suspect there is to know; adults have authority in great measure because they are the principal source of knowledge. The delicate balance between authority and curiosity is the subject of Margaret Mead's important book *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*. In it she contends that we are moving into a world of new, rapidly changing, and freely accessible information in which adults can no longer serve as counselors and advisors to the young, leading to what she calls a crisis in faith. "I believe this crisis in faith," she writes, "can be attributed . . . to the fact that there are now no elders who know more than the young themselves about what the young are experiencing."⁶

If Dr. Mead is right—if the elders can no longer be relied on as a source of knowledge for the young—then she has misnamed her book, and, indeed, missed her own point. She has not made a study of the generation gap but a study of the disappearance of the generation gap. For in a world where

the elders have no more authority than the young, there is no authority; the gap is closed, and everyone is of the same generation. And although I cannot agree with Dr. Mead that we have reached the point where "there are . . . no elders who know more than the young themselves about what the young are experiencing," I believe it is clear enough that because of their relentless revelations of all cultural secrets, the electric media pose a serious challenge both to the authority of adulthood and to the curiosity of children. Perhaps because Dr. Mead wrote her book during the emergence of the short-lived but much publicized counterculture movement, she assumed that youthful curiosity would not be impaired by the decline of adult authority. To a certain extent curiosity comes naturally to the young, but its development depends upon a growing awareness of the power of well-ordered questions to expose secrets. The world of the known and the not yet known is bridged by wonderment. But wonderment happens largely in a situation where the child's world is separate from the adult world, where children must seek entry, through their questions, into the adult world. As media merge the two worlds, as the tension created by secrets to be unraveled is diminished, the calculus of wonderment changes. Curiosity is replaced by cynicism or, even worse, arrogance. We are left with children who rely not on authoritative adults but on news from nowhere. We are left with children who are given answers to questions they never asked. We are left, in short, without children.

We must keep in mind here that it is not television alone that contributes to the opening of adult secrets. As I have already noted, the process whereby information became uncontrollable—whereby the home and school lost their commanding place as regulators of child development—began with the telegraph and is not a new problem. Every medium of communication that plugs into a wall socket has contributed its share in freeing children from the limited range of childhood sensibility. The movies, for example, played a

distinctive role in revealing to children the language and strategies of romance; those readers over the age of forty can testify to the fact that they learned the secrets of kissing from films. In today's world one can learn far more than that from a movie. But movies are not free, and it is still possible to bar children from those that display too much carnal knowledge or violence or adult madness. Except, of course, when they are shown on television. For with television there are no restrictions, economic or otherwise, and the occasional warning to parents that the "following program contains adult material . . . etc." only serves to ensure that more, not fewer, children will watch. What is it that they will see? What precisely are the secrets that will be revealed to them?

There are, as already mentioned, all of those matters that fall within the province of sexuality. Indeed, in revealing the secrets of sex, television has come close to eliminating the concept of sexual aberration altogether. For example, it is now common enough to see twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls displayed on television commercials as erotic objects. Some adults may have forgotten when such an act was regarded as psychopathic, and they will have to take my word for it that it was. This is not to say that adult males did not until recently covet pubescent girls. They did, but the point is that their desire was kept a carefully guarded secret, especially from the young themselves. Television not only exposes the secret but shows it to be an invidious inhibition and a matter of no special consequence. As in the Middle Ages, playing with the privy parts of children may once again become only a ribald amusement. Or, if that takes the matter too far, perhaps we may say that the explicit, albeit symbolic, use of children as material for the satisfaction of adult sexual fantasies has already become entirely acceptable. Indeed, conditioned by such use of children on television, the New York State Court of Appeals ruled in 1981 that no distinction may be made between children and adults in addressing the question of a pornographic film. If a film is judged obscene, the

court ruled, then a conviction can be sustained. But if it is not judged obscene, then any law that tries to distinguish between the status of children and adults is invidious.⁷ One might say that such a ruling clears the way for continued exploitation of children. Or, from another point of view, that such a ruling merely reflects the realities of our new electric environment. For there are, in fact, very few expressions of human sexuality that television now regards as serious enough to keep private, that is to say, regards as inappropriate for use as a theme for a program or as the focal point of a commercial. From vaginal spray commercials to discussions of male strippers, from programs preoccupied with the display of buttocks and breasts to documentaries on spouse swapping, the secrets unfold one by one, in one form or another. In some cases, to be sure, a subject such as incest, lesbianism, or infidelity is treated with seriousness and even dignity, but this is quite beside the point.

So that readers will not think these observations are merely the outpourings of a prudish sensibility, I should like to make my point as clearly as I can: The problem being discussed here is the difference between public knowledge and private knowledge, and what the effects are of the elimination of private knowledge by full-disclosure media. It is one thing to say that homosexuality is a sin in God's eyes, which I believe to be a dangerous idea. It is altogether different to say that something is lost when it is placed before children's eyes. It is one thing to say that human sexuality is base and ugly, which, in my opinion, is another dangerous idea. It is altogether different to say that its public display deprives it of its mystery and awe and changes the character and meaning of both sexuality and child development.

I am well aware that the word *hypocrisy* is sometimes used to describe a situation where public knowledge and private knowledge are rigidly kept apart. But the better face of hypocrisy is, after all, a certain social idealism. In the case of childhood, for example, secrecy is practiced in order to main-

tain the conditions for healthy and ordered growth. Childhood, as we ideally think of it, cannot exist without a certain measure of hypocrisy. Let us take violence, for example. There can be no denying that human beings spend an inordinate amount of time and energy in maiming and killing each other. Along with symbol making and toolmaking, killing is among our most distinctive characteristics. I have estimated that in my lifetime approximately seventy-five million people have been killed by other people. And this does not include those killings that are done, as Russell Baker puts it, in the name of private enterprise, e.g., street killings, family killings, robbery killings, etc. Is it hypocrisy to keep this knowledge from children? Hypocrisy should be made of sterner stuff. We wish to keep this knowledge from children because for all of its reality, too much of it too soon is quite likely dangerous to the well-being of an unformed mind. Enlightened opinion on child development claims it is necessary for children to believe that adults have control over their impulses to violence and that they have a clear conception of right and wrong. Through these beliefs, as Bruno Bettelheim has said, children can develop the positive feelings about themselves that give them the strength to nurture their rationality, which, in turn, will sustain them in adversity.⁸ C. H. Waddington has hypothesized that "one component of human evolution and the capacity for choice is the ability of the human child to accept on authority from elders the criteria for right and wrong."⁹ Without such assurances children find it difficult to be hopeful or courageous or disciplined. If it is hypocrisy to hide from children the "facts" of adult violence and moral ineptitude, it is nonetheless wise to do so. Surely, hypocrisy in the cause of strengthening child growth is no vice.

This is not to say that children must be protected from all knowledge of violence or moral degeneracy. As Bettelheim has demonstrated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, the importance of fairy tales lies in their capacity to reveal the existence

of evil in a form that permits children to integrate it without trauma. This is possible not only because the content of fairy tales has grown organically over centuries and is under the control of adults (who may, for example, modify the violence or the ending to suit the needs of a particular child) but also because the psychological context in which the tales are told is usually reassuring and is, therefore, therapeutic. But the violence that is now revealed over television is not mediated by a mother's voice, is not much modified to suit the child, is not governed by any theory of child development. It is there because television requires material that comes in inexhaustible variety. It is also there because television directs everything to everyone at the same time, which is to say, television cannot keep secrets of any kind. This results in the impossibility of protecting children from the fullest and harshest disclosure of unrelenting violence.

And here we must keep in mind that the stylized murders, rapes, and plunderings that are depicted on weekly fictional programs are much less than half the problem. They are, after all, clearly marked as fiction or pseudo-fairy tales, and we may assume (although not safely) that some children do not take them to be representations of real adult life. Far more impressive are the daily examples of violence and moral degeneracy that are the staple of TV news shows. These are not mitigated by the presence of recognizable and attractive actors and actresses. They are put forward as the stuff of everyday life. These are real murders, real rapes, real plunderings. And the fact that they *are* the stuff of real life makes them all the more powerful.

Researchers have been trying for years to determine the effects on children of such knowledge, their principal question being, To what extent does violence, when depicted so vividly and on such a scale, induce violence in children? Although this question is not trivial, it diverts our attention from such important questions as, To what extent does the depiction of the world *as it is* undermine a child's belief in

adult rationality, in the possibility of an ordered world, in a hopeful future? To what extent does it undermine the child's confidence in his or her future capacity to control the impulse to violence?

The secret of adult violence is, in fact, only part of a larger secret revealed by television. From the child's point of view, what is mostly shown on television is the plain fact that the adult world is filled with ineptitude, strife, and worry. Television, as Josh Meyrowitz has phrased it, opens to view the backstage of adult life. Researchers have paid very little attention to the implications of our revealing to children, in one televised form or another, the causes of marital conflict, the need for life insurance, the infinite possibilities of misunderstanding, the persistent incompetence of political leaders, the myriad afflictions of the human body. This list, which could be extended for a page, provides two items of particular interest as examples of how television is unsparing in revealing the secrets of adult life. The first, about which Meyrowitz has written with great insight, concerns the incompetence or at least vulnerability of political leaders. In its quest for material, especially of a "human interest" variety, television has found an almost inexhaustible supply in the private lives of politicians. Never before have so many people known so much about the wives, children, mistresses, drinking habits, sexual preferences, slips of the tongue, even inarticulateness of their national leaders. Those who did know at least some of this were kept informed by newspapers and magazines, which is to say that until television, the dark or private side of political life was mostly the business of adults. Children are not newspaper readers and never have been. But they are television viewers and therefore are continually exposed to accounts of the frailties of those who in a different age would have been perceived as without blemish. The result of this is that children develop what may be called adult attitudes—from cynicism to indifference—toward political leaders and toward the political process itself.

Similarly, children are kept constantly informed of the weaknesses of the human body, a matter that adults have typically tried to conceal from them. Of course, children have always known that people get sick and that in one way or another they die. But adults have found it wise to keep most of the details from children until a time when the facts will not overwhelm them. Television opens the closet door. For my own edification I counted the number of illnesses or physical impairments that were displayed on three consecutive evenings of network television. From hemorrhoids to the heartbreak of psoriasis, from neuritis and neuralgia to headaches and backaches, from arthritis to heart disease, from cancer to false teeth, from skin blemish to bad eyesight, there were forty-three references to the shocks our flesh is heir to. As if this were not enough to make life appear uncertain, if not terrifying, journey, during the same period there were two references to the hydrogen bomb, a discussion of the inability of nations to stop terrorism, and a summary of the Abscam trials.

I am sure I have given the impression to this point that all of the adult secrets made available to children through television concern that which is frightening, sordid, or confusing. But in fact television is not necessarily biased in this direction. If most of its disclosures are of that nature, it is because most of adult life is of that nature, filled with illness, violence, incompetence, and disorder. But not all of adult life. There is, for example, the existential pleasure of buying things. Television reveals to children at the earliest possible age the joys of consumerism, the satisfactions to be derived from buying almost anything—from floor wax to automobiles. Marshall McLuhan was once asked why the news on television is always bad news. He replied that it wasn't: the commercials are the good news. And indeed they are. It is a comfort to know that the drudgery of one's work can be relieved by a trip to Jamaica or Hawaii, that one's status may be enhanced by buying a Cordoba, that one's competence may be estab-

lished by using a certain detergent, that one's sex appeal may be enlivened by a mouthwash. These are the promises of American culture, and they give a certain coherence to adult motivations. By age three our children have been introduced to these motivations, for television invites everyone to share in them. I do not claim that these are mature motivations, and in fact in the next chapter I will try to show how television undermines any reasonable concept of mature adulthood. The point here is simply that the "good news" on television is *adult* good news, about which children are entirely knowledgeable by age seven.

Neither do I claim that children in an earlier period were entirely ignorant of the material of the adult world, only that not since the Middle Ages have children known so much about adult life as now. Not even the ten-year-old girls working in the mines in England in the eighteenth century were as knowing as our own children. The children of the industrial revolution knew very little beyond the horror of their own lives. Through the miracle of symbols and electricity our own children know everything anyone else knows—the good with the bad. Nothing is mysterious, nothing awesome, nothing is held back from public view. Indeed, it is a common enough observation, particularly favored by television executives when under attack, that whatever else may be said about television's impact on the young, today's children are better informed than any previous group of youngsters. The metaphor usually employed is that television is a window to the world. This observation is entirely correct, but why it should be taken as a sign of progress is a mystery. What does it mean that our children are better informed than ever before? That they know what the elders know? It means that they have become adults, or, at least, adult-like. It means—to use a metaphor of my own—that in having access to the previously hidden fruit of adult information, they are expelled from the garden of childhood.