Why are boys so little influenced by religion? is a question very often asked, and asked by those who feel really and deeply their responsibility in this matter, who see clearly what evil results follow from the absence of religion as a motive power in a boy's life.¹

This statement, posed almost a hundred years ago by an English minister, broaches a problem that should be of special interest to the historian of religions: the relationship of children, in this case males, to religion. Except in such miraculous birth stories as those of Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus, and certain Christian saints, infants do not simply pop out of the womb as religious beings. As scholars have recognized from Arnold Van Gennep on, religions place a great emphasis on rites of passage that define the beginnings and ends of different life stages,
including childhood. However, while anthropologists, historians of religions, and literary critics have made practically an industry out of the study of initiation rites, *homo religiosus* tends to be viewed as an adult fait accompli, as if that which makes such a being religious must be there from the start of his life, and not acquired by growth through various life stages and levels of consciousness.

While both major encyclopedias of religion, those of James Hastings (1911) and Mircea Eliade (1987), contain substantial entries on children, of the classic theorists of religion, only Sigmund Freud ventured to explore the child's relationship to the religious disposition.\(^2\) To be sure, Gerardus van der Leeuw treats briefly of "children of God"; C. G. Jung, following the survey of Károly Kerényi, proffers a psychological explanation of the archetype of the primordial child; and Eliade and Joseph Campbell, respectively, discuss the motifs of the abandoned child and the infant exile, the latter of which was already made famous by Otto Rank.\(^3\) But the first of those four themes is really a Christian metaphor for filiation to God in general, while the other three are universal myths. It was left to Freud to hypothesize an analogy between religion, conceived hostilely as the universal neurosis of humanity, and what he construed as the obsessional neurosis of children stemming from Oedipal feelings toward the father.\(^4\)

Although that particular theory of Freud's was, not surprisingly, almost universally rejected, one of his related hypotheses will be seen to have a curious bearing on the subject of this paper. My purpose is to reveal a Western literary motif about male children that, stemming from a terse pericope in the Hebrew Bible, presents them as a sacrilegious type—ancient precursors to the " punks," "skinheads," and

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“wilding” youths who stalk the streets of modern metropolises. As I will show through analysis of classic literary examples, this motif has survived to our own century, and, in strange accordance with the minister’s statement above, always implies a kinship between boys, irreligiousness, and “evil,” thereby subverting the virtual beatification of children traditionally embraced by Christianity. (In limiting my scope almost exclusively to the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition, I leave it to some of my readers to ponder the striking contrasts between this particular motif and such revered images of boyish mischievousness found elsewhere—for example, the image of the divine child Krishna in his role as butter thief, as he is celebrated in popular Indian rās lilās.)

II

The tale of 2 Kings 2:23–24 about what happened to Elisha on his way from Jericho up to Bethel is hauntingly brief: approached on the way by some small boys from the city who jeer at him, chanting, “Go up, you baldhead!” the prophet turns and curses them in God’s name, and promptly two she-bears emerge from the woods and maul forty-two of the boys. This story is prone to offend the sensibility of the modern reader, whose probable reaction may be summed up by one of the eight Victorian coauthors of the little book, The Bible and the Child (1896), who elsewhere called it “one of the stories which naturally repel us more than any other in the Old Testament.” More recent commentators describe the tale as “repugnant,” “a [dreadful] story from which the Bible reader shrinks,” or by which “the modern reader cannot but be a trifle shocked,” and Oxford’s 1952 Revised Standard Version Bible’s annotation to it lists passages from the three Synoptic Gospels that “provide a better guide to Biblical teaching on how to treat children,” assuring us: “Not all ancient writers, to say nothing of modern, would have told a story like this to inculcate respect for a


prophet.” The tale is so notorious that an agnostic character in a best-selling science fiction novel can retell it, citing the biblical book and chapter where it occurs, to help illustrate why he disdains traditional Western religion.8

The horrific effect of 2 Kings 2:23–24 is intensified by the mode of its telling, which is cool and detached. Commenting on lines 1–18 of the same chapter, Hermann Gunkel observed over sixty years ago that all primitive storytelling, including that of Israel, fixes the reader’s attention mainly on what can be seen or heard; the “inner life,” not yet sufficiently disclosed to be explicitly treated and depicted in detail, “finds only indirect expression: it is hidden behind actions and words. Therefore the expositor’s real task is to read between the lines and bring out the spiritual conditions and experiences thus shown through word and deed.”9 Consistent with what Erich Auerbach considered to be the stylistic hallmark of Hebrew Bible narrative, the deuteronomist tale of Elisha’s mockery is “fraught with background,” and elicits more questions than it answers.10 Of these, several main ones stand out in commentaries from the last hundred years.

Why would Elisha be targeted for insult? Exegesis addressing this question usually focus on the epithet “baldhead.” Because baldness was a cause of reproach and suspicion in the ancient Near East,11 it would have been instinctive for discourteous boys to make fun of Elisha, especially since his smooth head stood in sharp contrast to his rough hairskin mantle inherited from Elijah, “the lord of hair.”12 According to a common speculation that has little evidence to support it, Elisha’s “baldness” was actually a tonsure signifying his prophetic vocation;13 as such, it would have naturally attracted the attention of

12 Farrar, The Second Book of Kings, p. 27.
the boys, to whom the prophets’ “extravagant eccentricities must have been a regular source of amusement.”14 According to another theory, the boys’ conduct was not simply a stupid youthful escapade (Dummerjungenstreich); rather, in presenting an opposite example of the warm reception that Elisha had experienced shortly before in Jericho, their mockery gave expression to the negative attitudes that the citizens of Bethel, the chief center of calf-worship, must have held toward Yahweh’s prophets.15

Why were the curse and punishment so harsh? And were they warranted? Biblical commentators often point out that “forty-two” is an ominous number that refers not to a specific number of boys, but more generally to “a large number” (2 Kings 10:14). However, this does nothing to mitigate the horror of Elisha’s curse, which has been called “humorless and savage,”16 and of the attack by bears (Ursi syriaci), a feared animal not uncommon in ancient Palestine (e.g., 1 Sam. 17:34, 36; Amos 5:19; Hos. 13:7–8). Asserting that “we cannot repress the shudder with which we read” of the prophet’s bloody curse, which diverges so radically from the general pattern of his compassionate intercessions, one exegete states categorically: “Surely the punishment was disproportionate to the offence!”17 But given the coldheartedness already displayed by his mentor Elijah, most notably in 1:9–16, the brutality of Elisha’s execration might seem condoned by the text, whose phrase “in the name of the Lord” indicates that it was by God’s power, not Elisha’s, that the curse was carried out.18 Such a view is supported by the contention that the boys’ offense was blasphemous insofar as deriding God’s prophets is equivalent to deriding God himself,19 though it has also been argued that such a curse itself “borders on blasphemy.”20 Still a third conjecture, whose expounders will be cited below, does away with the need of justifying the curse and

14 Gray, p. 479.  
16 Gaster (n. 7 above), p. 517.  
18 Fricke, pp. 35–36.  
19 For example, Robinson, p. 28, weighs the boys’ crime against the legislation of Deut. 18:19 and Lev. 24:10–16.  
20 Gray, p. 480.
punishment by dismissing the notion that any curse was uttered in the first place: perhaps a mauling incident near Bethel really happened, not as the supernatural result of a curse, or as divine punishment, but as a natural calamity coinciding with Elisha’s visit, of which this tale expresses a guilt-ridden recollection.

*What is the tale’s moral point, if any?* A common supposition is that it was recorded to “enhance” the prophet’s fame,21 or to enforce the lesson of respect for his inviolability, and, like the two preceding miracles, to confirm his inheritance of Elijah’s spiritual powers.22 At the same time, those commentators who assume that the bear incident was a natural catastrophe tend to shift the focus off of the prophet and onto the possible motives of the people who told the story. One of those commentators views this as “a puerile tale” that simply expresses “the memory of some catastrophe which happened to coincide with Elisha’s visit to Bethel and was turned to account by the local dervish-community to awe their children.”23 Another exegete concurs: “Die bekannte Neigung des Volkes, solche Unglücksfälle als Strafe Gottes zu deuten und daher nach der Schuld zu fragen, konnte zum Glauben führen, dass sich die Leute am Propheten versündigt hatten.”24 Agreeing that what appears to us as a natural accident may have struck the citizens of Bethel as an act of God, another interpreter views this tale as a “crude” demonstration of God’s retributive justice (a doctrine central to the deuteronomists) and concludes that such tales were included by the scriptural editors as “popular and effective teaching aids to instruct the people of the danger of turning away from their God, and to demonstrate that the only security lay in rigid obedience to the will of God as expressed in his law and spoken by his true prophets.”25

Regardless of whether 2 Kings 2:23–24 is grounded in an actual event, a problematic issue not yet broached by scholars is the negative image the tale presents of small boys. So much attention is paid to the issues of Elisha’s baldness, the harshness of the curse and punishment,

21 *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (n. 7 above), 2:92.
23 Gray (n. 13 above), p. 479. Likewise Montgomery (n. 13 above), p. 355, finds this story to read “like a *Bubenmärchen* to frighten the young into respect for their reverend elders.”
25 Robinson (n. 13 above), p. 29.
the idolatrous practices and possible guilt feelings of the Bethel citizenry, and the tale’s moral intent that the only question asked about the pack of hellions whose derision triggered the incident concerns the import of their number. While The New American Bible’s note to this pericope points out that “neither Elisha nor the bears behave in character,” no one would think of saying the same about the boys; on the contrary, when their misconduct has been commented on, it has been assumed to be typical of boys being boys. Because Elisha’s mockers have otherwise been neglected, a troubling problem is left unaddressed: what does this tale suggest about male children, particularly in their relation to the sacred (as represented by Elisha)?

The variant versions of this story in the Babylonian Talmud suggest that the early rabbinic thinkers were troubled by the idea of prophet-mocking children being mangled by divinely commissioned bears. According to the Haggadah, Elisha’s mockers were not boys, but adult water carriers from Jericho [sic] who “were bare [menu’arim] of precepts” and “little of faith,” or who “behaved like little children” or “silly boys” because their livelihood was ruined by his miraculous healing of Jericho’s waters (2:19–22), and Elisha was punished for his excessive severity by having to endure three bouts of disease, the third of which proved fatal. By transforming the boys into grown men, this retelling of the biblical story not only discards the troublesome image of the prophet as a curser of children (an image far less absolvable than that of a curser of men), but also eschews the negative portrayal of little boys as prophet mockers.

This haggadic twist renders implications from the tale that contrast sharply with those imposed on it in the Septuagint’s “Lucianic” (or “Antiochian”) recension, which, as one of so-called trifaria varietas of the Greek Old Testament (the other two belonging to Origen and Hesychius), is traditionally attributed to Lucian of Samosata, the

26 Thus, Farrar finds these “lads” to betray “the rudeness which in boys is often a venial characteristic of their gay spirits or want of proper training, and, which to this day is common among boys in the East” (The Second Book of Kings [n. 6 above], p. 27). Similarly, albeit without the racist edge of Farrar’s final clause, Gaster (n. 7 above) suggests that Elisha’s mockers “were simply behaving like all ill-bred children everywhere” (p. 517). Assuming likewise that these boys “are the prototype of thousands of youth today,” another annotator pontificates: “Lawless youth may not be torn asunder by bears, but they are rent by passions, devoured by appetite, until their characters and careers and all their hopes for happy, useful living are destroyed” (The Interpreter’s Bible [n. 7 above], 3:197).

presbyter of Antioch who was martyred under Maximin in 311 or 312 c.e. Among Lucian's distinctive governing principles as recensionist is his "endeavour to seek out, and incorporate, what in [his] judgement were the most ancient and best attested readings, for the conservation of which he has no hesitation in resorting to conflation."28 True to this eclectic rule, his rendering of the verse recounting Elisha's mockery adds the phrase καὶ ἐλιθαζὼν αὐτῶν, "and they stoned him," an accession perhaps made to accommodate another Greek translation that took the wurqsw ("they mocked") of the Masoretic text for wurqsw ("they stoned"). While this century's most thoroughgoing and influential Lucianic researcher, Alfred Rahlfs, dismissed the variant rendering of the Masoretic term as a doublet, two more recent scholars have suggested that it might be "an embellishment which sought to explain the prophet's violent outburst against children."29 Whatever the case may be, the inserted phrase "and they stoned him" turns the boys' offense into something far more serious than mere taunting; in the Hebrew scriptures, the act of stoning is always presented as deadly business, whether directed against sinners (Num. 15:36; Josh. 7:25) or holy men (1 Kings 21:13; 2 Chron. 24:21), and this remains the case in the New Testament, which reports it to be the technique used to kill Stephen (Acts 8:58-59) and numerous other martyrs (Heb. 11:37).

While Lucian's recension became the accepted text of the Greek Old Testament throughout Asia Minor, the Vulgate Latin Bible that prevailed in Western Europe makes no mention of any stoning in 2 Kings 2:23. Nevertheless, the mockery of Elisha became a grim, standardized scene in medieval Christian art, most notably in illuminated manuscripts; a typical illustration shows the robed prophet, bald and bearded, extending one open hand (or both) upward, and gazing at a group of diminutive taunters as two bears stalk nearby or attack them. The most provocative examples are several from the early and mid-fourteenth century that juxtapose the portrayal of Elisha's mockery with depictions of Christ before Herod, the crowning of his head with thorns, and his bearing of the cross.30 These linkings suggest that by

30 Princeton University's Index of Christian Art, which covers the Common Era up to 1400, includes under "Elisha: Mocked" some two dozen illustrations from illuminated MSS ranging in date from the ninth century to the late fourteenth, together with several renditions of this scene in enamel, fresco, glass, and sculpture. For the juxtaposition of
the late Middle Ages Elisha’s mockery was perceived as a prefiguration of Christ’s Passion.

Today, when Elisha’s mockery still puzzles exegetes, it is tempting to wonder what Freud would have made of the phallic implication of the prophet’s bald head, or how the founder of psychoanalysis would have construed this story’s peculiar inversion of the Oedipal/primal-horde hypothesis by which he tried to explain the origin of moral restrictions and religion: while Freud had the vengeful sons kill and eat the dominant father to gain possession of the primal father’s wives, this tale has the wrathful father figure (Elisha) avenge himself upon the pack of aggressive sons (boys) by summoning the mothers (she-bears) to devour them.31 On a strictly literary level, it is no less interesting to speculate how Mikhail Bakhtin would have viewed Elisha’s mockery. Although Bakhtin never to my knowledge extended his discussion of carnival to Hebrew Bible narrative, this tale displays a number of the definitive traits of folk carnival culture and grotesque realism that the Russian theorist expounded in the introduction to his classic study on Rabelais: “mocking the deity,” “carnival laughter,” “degradation,” and “abusive language,” in the boys’ derision of the prophet; “oaths and curses” (two specific forms of “abusive language” mentioned by Bakhtin), in the prophet’s execration; “bodily dismemberment,” in the mangling by the bears. The crucial point at which the Bethel boys story departs irreconcilably from the carnivalesque is in its conclusion; for if carnival always conveys—in Bakhtin’s words—“the sense of the gay relativity of prevalent truths and authorities,” that sense is negated by the bears, whose grisly punitive action against the boys reaffirms the authority and dignity both of Elisha as prophet and of the God he represents.32

Elisha’s mockery with Christ before Herod Antipas, see the MS of Ulrich of Lilienfeld, *Concordantiae Caritatis*, fol. 86v, in the Stiftsbibliothek, 151, Lilienfeld, Austria, a photo of which is included in the Index of Christian Art. For the juxtaposition of Elisha’s mockery with Christ’s crowning with thorns and his bearing of the cross, see the following MSS of *Biblia pauperum*: (1) (ca. 1300), fol. 5r, in the Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Germany, Clm. 23425, reproduced in Alfred Stange, *Deutsche malerei der gotik*, 11 vols. (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1934–61), vol. 1, fig. 219; (2) (ca. 1310), fol. 6v, in the Stiftsbibliothek, Saint Florian, Austria, III 207; (3) (first half of fourteenth century), fol. 6v, in the Landesbibliothek, Weimar, Germany, fol. max. 4, reproduced in H. Gabelentz, *Die Biblia pauperum und Apokalypse der Grossherzogl: Bibliothek zu Weimar, herausgegeben von Hans von der Gabelentz* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1912), pl. 12. All three MSS are listed in Christian Art Index, which includes reproductions of 1 and 3, but only a description of 2.


Nonetheless, as Bakhtin found the influence of carnival to be considerable during all periods of literary development, albeit stronger and more direct in some of them, such as the Renaissance, than in others, so may we discover a clear topos finding its paradigm in 2 Kings 2:23–24 to recur in literature from the Renaissance to our own time.\(^3^3\) Instances of this topos, which I term the Bethel boys motif, exhibit the following definitive pattern: an adult, almost always male and notorious for a certain eccentricity or unpopular distinction, is gratuitously mocked, stoned, or abused in some other manner by a pack of two or more anonymous street urchins. As we will see, the recurrences of this motif over the last several centuries have helped perpetuate a negative image of boys that opposes the traditional Christian and Romantic views. Moreover, in each recurring case, the boys, despite whatever curse their eccentric victim might utter against them, and despite whatever attempts might be made by other adults to chastise them, inevitably escape without punishment, thereby allowing the motif to fulfill its carnival potential as a celebration of "relativity"—a potential that was repressed by divinely commissioned bears in the biblical prototype. Let us first consider the ancient and medieval preconditions for the perpetuation of the motif.

III

In antiquity the association of childhood with mischief, wildness, and affrontiveness was by no means unique to the Hebrew folklorists who immortalized Elisha's encounter with the Bethel urchins. Those boys' behavior would not have surprised Plato, whose Athenian observes: "Now of all wild young things a boy is the most difficult to handle. Just because he more than any other has a fount of intelligence in him which has not yet 'run clear,' he is the craftiest, most mischievous, and unruliest of brutes."\(^3^4\) Consistent with the notion of children as a curse which crops up in the dramas of Euripides, the fragments of Democritus and Menander, and the \textit{dicta} of Epicurus,\(^3^5\) Plato's Athenian proceeds to recommend that corrective chastisement "as befits a slave" should be administered to any boy, and to his attendant and teacher as well, by any free person in whose presence he commits a serious fault. Aristotle, though perhaps less zealous about punishing children, viewed

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 273.


\(^{35}\) These examples are cited by W. H. S. Jones in his entry on Greek views of children in Hastings, ed. (n. 2 above), 3:539.
them no less adversely. According to him, the child lives “at the beck and call of appetite,”36 and thus is “imperfect,” his “excellence” being “not relative to himself alone, but to the perfect man and to his teacher,” as the slave’s is to a master.37

The question of the child’s imperfection becomes immeasurably more complicated in the Judeo-Christian context because of its notion of man’s having been created in the “image of God,” which, as introduced in the priestly narrative of Gen. 1:26–27, presumably connotes perfection. Disregarding the time-honored yet unresolved linguistic-theological debate over whether that text refers simply to concrete resemblance or means to convey a more abstract, spiritual idea such as that of human personality in its relation to God, we need only note here that the concept underwent a momentous metamorphosis as it was assimilated into Christian thought: whereas the Hebrew Bible never implies that the image of God was lost through the Fall, or that man no longer possesses that image, the New Testament consistently (except in 1 Cor. 11:7 and Jas. 3:9, which retain the Hebraic view) presents the *imago dei* as something not belonging to man and identifies it instead with Christ, through whom the believer is transformed into the same image.38

How does this consideration bear upon Jewish and Christian views toward children? Notwithstanding Irenaeus’s claim in the late second-century East that Adam “was a child, not yet having his understanding perfected,” or Judah Halevi’s suggestion amidst the Spanish *reconquista* a thousand years later that God created the first man “in the form of an adolescent, perfect in body and mind,” Western thinkers and artists (e.g., Michelangelo) have generally assumed that the first man was created as a young adult—an assumption with which the Talmud concurs, asserting that Adam was not like a child, but like a man of twenty years of age.39 Yet neither the Hebrew nor the Christian scriptures indicate whether children attain that image before they reach maturity. The Hebrew Bible tends to concentrate on the relation of children to the family and the importance of progeny as a sign of

38 *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (n. 7 above), 2:682–85, s.v. “Image of God.”
God’s favor. In the New Testament, however, children take on a whole new significance with Jesus’ teaching that only by becoming “like children” can someone hope to enter heaven (Matt. 18:2–3; Mark 10:14–15; Luke 18:16–17) and his claim that heaven’s kingdom “belongs” to such as them (Matt. 19:14). These claims, the most renowned statements about children anywhere in the Bible, implicitly exonerate children from association with Adam’s guilt (perhaps since he was an adult when he committed his fatal sin) and reverse the Hellenic notion of the child as imperfect. It would be safe to surmise that if Jesus’ association of “little ones” with innocence and redemption had persisted as the only view of youngsters in the West, the Bethel boys motif would not have survived the advent of the Christian era.

It must not be overlooked, however, that Jesus’ positive view of children finds stiff opposition elsewhere in the New Testament canon. While Jesus’ exaltation of children is clearly echoed by the author of 1 Pet. 2:2, the famous analogy by which Paul tries to illustrate his own religious conversion for the Christians at Corinth counters his own savior’s words: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11). For Paul, abandoning “childish ways” signifies reaching the realization that knowledge and the capacity to convey it in prophecies or tongues are faulty and, hence, are to be valued less than love, faith, and hope as gifts of the Spirit. The preceding verse made clear (in terms that seem to assume the Aristotelian notion of the child as an imperfect being whose perfection is relative to the perfect man) that “when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away”; here, “perfect” denotes spiritual maturity (“I became a man”), or the awareness that love, faith, and hope are the greatest gifts, while “imperfect” denotes spiritual infancy (“childish ways”), or reliance on tongues and prophecies. Paul therefore exhorts his audience, in effect, to grow up: “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking” (14:20).

Paul’s figurative assertion of the spiritual superiority of adulthood over childhood accords with his understanding of the first man, Adam, through whose disobedience all mankind inherited sin, condemnation, and death, as the type of Christ, the second or last Adam who acquits, justifies, and restores mankind to life (e.g., Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45–47). From this typological view it would seem to follow that infancy and childhood, of all stages of life, are the ones most innately linked to original sin, because all infants are born into the world as

heirs of Adam’s fallen state and cannot hope to be redeemed until (or unless) they convert later in life to faith in Christ, as Paul himself did as a young man on the road to Damascus. (It is noteworthy that the New Testament provides no direct evidence for the baptism of infants, which may or may not suggest that this purificatory water rite symbolizing the first step toward redemption was reserved for adults.)

This implication of Pauline doctrine achieved explicit expression several centuries later in the first two books of Augustine’s *Confessions* (transcribed 397–401), where the Bishop of Hippo ruminates upon the first sixteen years of his life. As Peter Brown has observed, nothing reveals Augustine’s preoccupation with the frailty and misguidedness of the human will more clearly than the way he recounts his adolescence. His African readers tended to consider a boy innocent until he reached puberty, “as if,” Augustine once wrote, “the only sins you could commit were those in which you use your genitals.” But Augustine, guilt-ridden for having resisted Christianity as a youth, looks back on childhood as the time when all male youngsters participate in the pernicious legacy of Adam’s fall. While reminiscing in book I of the *Confessions* about the beatings he and his classmates received for idleness at school, he reflects: “Countless boys long since forgotten had built up this stony path for us to tread and we were made to pass along it, adding to the toil and sorrow of the sons of Adam.” Here the phrase “sons of Adam” is not meant merely as a figure of speech. Augustine’s intent of linking boyhood literally with Adam’s guilt, rather than with the heavenly quality which Jesus attributed to the child, becomes clear near the end of book 1; there (chap. 19), after enumerating the various faults that led him into “the whirlpool of debasement” (p. 39) as a boy (e.g., lying, pilferage, cheating, gluttony, and indulgence in frivolity), he struggles to reconcile the innocent light in which Jesus placed children with his own recollections of his boyhood delinquency: “Can this be the innocence of childhood? Far from it, O Lord! But I beg you to forgive it. For commanders and kings may take the place of tutors and schoolmasters, nuts and balls and pet birds may give way to money and states and servants, but these same passions remain with us while one stage of life follows upon

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41 Arguments supporting both views are discussed in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Baptism,” esp. 1:352.


43 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), 1:9, p. 30. All quotations are from this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text. The colon separates the numbers of the book and the chapter, which are followed by the page.
another. . . . It was, then, simply because they are small that you used children to symbolize humility when, as our King, you commended it by saying that *the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*” (p. 40).44

For Augustine, the child’s “sins” portend the adult’s and, hence, are far more haunting than the latter. It is for this reason that he can devote the bulk of book 2 to his recollection of a single act of youthful vandalism: his robbing of a neighbor’s pear tree with a gang of boys when he was sixteen years of age. Consistent with his notion of children as “sons of Adam,” the repentant adult Augustine links his boyhood pilferage of the pears to Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit in no uncertain terms: “Perhaps we ate some of them, but our real pleasure consisted in *doing something that was forbidden*” (2:4, p. 47; emphasis mine).

While Augustine’s theft belongs to a different order of mischief than the taunting of the bald Elisha, his account of his misdemeanor displays several prominent features of the Bethel boys motif: the perpetration of the crime by a gang of anonymous boys (Augustine being the only one named); the crime’s gratuitousness (“We took away an enormous quantity of pears, not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs” [2:4, p. 47]); the corruptive influence of gang psychology (“I am quite sure that I would not have done it on my own” [2:8, p. 51]); and *Schadenfreude* with regard to the adult victims (“We were tickled to laughter by the prank we had played, because no one suspected us although the owners were furious” [2:9, p. 52]). Unlike Elisha’s mockers, young Augustine and his accomplices suffered no immediate, violent, and physical punishment for their crime. But overhanging his whole account of the pear tree escapade is the ominous aura of a much graver consequence—his soul’s perdition: “The evil in me was foul, but I loved it. I loved my own perdition and my own faults, not the things for which I committed wrong, but the wrong itself” (2:4, p. 47; cf. 2:6, p. 50).

Some eight hundred years after Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, Wolfram von Eschenbach stopped just short of revivifying the Bethel boys motif in his Middle High German masterpiece *Parzival* (written ca. 1200–ca. 1210). When the hero, a *reiner Tor* dressed in the fool’s garb bestowed on him by his mother, rides into Nantes for the first

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44 Pine-Coffin’s translation of “humilitatis ergo signum in statura pueritiae, rex noster” in the last sentence is less literal, but semantically more compelling, than its rendering in the Loeb edition as “Thou therefore, O our King, has approved the character of humility in the stature of childhood” (*St. Augustine’s Confessions*, trans. William Watts [London: Heinemann, 1912]).
time, it is noted that small children (diu kindelin) follow him up to King Arthur’s palace; however, nothing more is said about them, and so we cannot know whether they teased him.\(^{45}\) That the most complete and explicit repetitions of the Bethel boys motif do not begin appearing in literature until the Renaissance might reflect what Philippe Ariès sees as the lack of a concept of childhood as a distinct period of life prior to the late Middle Ages. The absence of lifelike representations of children in earlier medieval art suggests that “there was no place for childhood in the medieval world”: “In the world of Romanesque formulas, right up to the end of the thirteenth century, there are no children characterized by a special expression but only men on a reduced scale. This refusal to accept child morphology in art is to be found too in most ancient civilizations.”\(^{46}\) (His point holds true, incidentally, with the medieval illustrations of Elisha’s mockery mentioned earlier.) When the several types of children which Ariès finds to resemble more closely the modern concept of childhood begin to appear about the thirteenth century, that is, the holy child, the angelic being, and the symbol of the soul, they are moral inversions of the delinquent Bethel boys type.

To be sure, abhorrence of juveniles was not unheard of during the Middle Ages.\(^{47}\) And the violence of socially marginal youth gangs in early Ireland known as fian is captured in the Fenian narrative tradition. As shown by Joseph Falaky Nagy, stories about fénnidi, or members of those gangs, like those in the twelfth-century text Macgnimartha Finn (The boyhood deeds of Finn), “reflect a dimly visible social reality, namely, some institutionalized form of extrasocial life,” an “outlawry” on the boundary between wilderness and society, the immaturity of childhood and the responsibilities of settled adult life.\(^{48}\) Nonetheless, visual artists of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance


\(^{47}\) For example, consider the following passage from the farcical thirteenth-century work, La riote du monde, ed. J. Ulrich, in Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie 8 (1884): 275–89: “Si n’amai onques petit anfant ne moien ne grant: li petis est anieus a norir, et si ne lait la gent dormir par nui; li moiens va aval les rues si les convient garder de chevaus et des caretes; li grans guerroie le pere et la mere por les riches eritages avoir et si le convient a le fie racater des tavernes” (p. 282).

Bad Boys of Bethel

seem to have been hesitant to portray the child in any light other than a pleasant one, or as anything other than a fully integrated member of society. Ariès demonstrates that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while the old tradition of depicting the Holy Childhood of Jesus and of various saints persisted, a lay iconography detached itself, but continued portraying children in a generally fawning manner.49

To find anything resembling the Fenian association of boyhood with delinquency and social marginality in the mainstream literary tradition of Europe, we must await that distinctive type of roguish boy, the picaro, who makes his debut in two Spanish works, the anonymous Lazarillo de Tormes (1553) and Mateo Alemán's Guzmán de Alfarache (1599), and is subsequently adapted by authors of other countries. Picaresque narrative, typically autobiographical in perspective, is the first fictional form to give a voice to the bad boy type and to allow him (as a repentant adult looking back on his life) to tell his own story. Depicted in cynical, realistic tones, the picaro's childhood inverts the Holy Childhood theme with which European visual artists had been preoccupied for centuries and exposes a less innocent side of juvenility that was obscured in the Renaissance subject paintings discussed by Ariès: Lázaro and Guzmán, the sons of a woman of loose morals and a prostitute respectively (as opposed to the virgin mother of Christ), are clever, mischievous, and thieving urchins, the servants of a series of masters, who renounce their unethical ways only after reaching maturity.

At first glance the picaro's rascality and social marginality might seem to qualify him as a distant descendant of Elisha's young tormentors. However, the picaro differs from them insofar as he ordinarily is not anonymous and does not run with a gang, and his mischief against adults is generally not gratuitous but, rather, aimed at achieving some simple practical end, like getting a bite to eat. Perhaps the most telling common denominator between the Bethel boys topos and the picaresque is their mutual expression of carnival influence. The pericope 2 Kings 2:23–24, as discussed earlier, conforms to folkloric carnival-grotesque patterns in every respect except its refusal to acknowledge the relativity of truths and authorities, while the early picaresque novel, as Bakhtin describes it once in passing, is a "directly carnivalesque" form, a "basic source of carnivalization" for Renaissance

49 Anecdotal paintings that present the child with his playmates, in a crowd, serving as an apprentice to some sort of craftsman, or at school, suggest that "children mingled with adults in everyday life," and that "painters were particularly fond of depicting childhood for its graceful or picturesque qualities . . . , and they delighted in stressing the presence of a child in a group or a crowd" (Ariès, pp. 37–38).
literature. True to its carnival spirit, the picaresque was promptly perceived as a threat to the "official" culture of Roman Catholic Christendom at the time; Lazarillo, with its merciless barbs against the clergy, was banned by the Inquisition in 1559.

IV

Because the carnival influence was exceptionally strong during the Renaissance, the same Zeitgeist that helped spawn the picaro novel allowed the Bethel boys motif, after centuries of dormancy, not only to recur but also to realize its full carnival potential by ignoring the idea of God's absolute authority, power, and retributive justice. This happened when the motif was taken up by Miguel de Cervantes, whom Bakhtin identifies as one of the most carnivalesque of all authors, and whose Don Quixote of La Mancha (Don Quijote de la Mancha, pt. 1, 1605; pt. 2, 1615) is generally accepted as the first and prototypical modern novel. Toward the Quixote's end, the mad knight and his peasant squire arrive astride their horse and donkey at Barcelona:

As they were entering it, the Evil One [el malo], who is the author of all mischief, and young boys [los muchachos], who are worse than the devil, appeared on the scene. A couple of audacious, mischievous urchins forced their way through the crowd, and one of them lifting up Dapple's tail and the other Rocinante's, inserted a bunch of furze under each. The poor beasts felt the strange spurs and added to their discomfort by pressing their tails tight and bucking, as a result of which they flung their masters to the ground. Don Quixote, embarrassed and humiliated, hurried to remove the plume from his poor nag's tail, while Sancho did the same for Dapple. His conductors tried to punish the audacity of the boys, but there was no possibility of doing so, for they hid themselves among the hundreds of others that were following them.51

To consider this scene as a variation on the Bethel boys motif, we need not assume that Cervantes was thinking of Elisha's mockery when he composed it, though two other passages in the Quixote are thought to refer to specific lines elsewhere in 2 Kings.52 Like the tale of Elisha's mockery, the scene above revolves around the gratuitous tormenting of an eccentric adult man (not to mention his unusual partner) by anonymous urchins. This parallel is all the more striking given the tendency

52 See Juan Antonio Monroy, La Biblia en el "Quijote" (Madrid: Suarez, 1963), pp. 102–3, 122–23.
of some Quixote critics to consider the mad knight Christlike and to interpret his stay in Barcelona as part of his “Passion”; as mentioned earlier, medieval allegorists interpreted Elisha’s mockery the same way.  

However, there are significant modifications. First, whereas Elisha’s mockery took place in a marginal, Fenian zone beside the woods outside Bethel (“while he was going up on the way”), the prank played on Don Quixote occurs within the bounds of Barcelona (“as they were entering it”). This point is noteworthy because, from Cervantes on, the Bethel boys motif will recur exclusively with scenes set within cities or towns. Second, whereas the biblical narrator passed no explicit judgment on Elisha’s mockers, and instead let their bloody fate speak for itself as moral commentary on their action, Cervantes’ notoriously ironic (and in this case Augustinian) narrator remarks what he considers to be the innate evil of all boys (muchachos), characterizing them as being worse than the Evil One (el malo). Third, the victim in Cervantes’ text is not a baldheaded prophet but a middle-aged madman wearing archaic mildewed armor and a barber’s basin as a helmet, who thinks he is a knight. Whereas the fame that surrounded Elisha by the time he reached Bethel resulted from his proven miraculous powers, Don Quixote is renowned throughout Spain by the time he reaches Barcelona because everyone has read or heard of the published historia of his humorous misadventures, that is, part 1 of the Quixote. Fourth, the means of torment differs: offensive name-calling (“Baldhead”) is replaced by mischievous tampering with the victim’s horse. Finally, unlike Elisha’s tormentors, the boys who play this prank on Don Quixote escape unpunished; indeed, this is not the last time he will be haunted by anonymous muchachos or muchachos.  

53 Extending from Kierkegaard, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky through Unamuno and his followers to the present day, the tendency of comparing Don Quixote to Christ is a hallmark of the religious trend in Quixote criticism examined in chap. 5 of my study, The Sanctification of Don Quixote: From Hidalgo to Priest (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).  

54 An interesting development following this scene, and one which I have yet to find discussed in Quixote criticism, is the repeated, passing references to urchins who flock about the knight in the streets of Barcelona, and later, on the outskirts of his village: “See, Don Antonio, even the boys [los muchachos] of this city know me without ever having seen me” (2:62, p. 770); “At the entrance of the village, so says Cide Hamete, Don Quixote saw two boys [dos muchachos] quarreling” (2:73, p. 821); “So at length, with the boys [mochachos] capering around them . . . they made their entrance into the town and proceeded to Don Quixote’s house” (p. 823). These allusions may not be arbitrary. Given the narrator’s facetious association of boys with the Evil One who “is the author of all mischief,” their ubiquity in the Barcelona streets seems to portend the disaster that awaits Don Quixote at the end of his sojourn there: his defeat by the Knight of the White Moon, which puts an end to his chivalric career. A similarly portentous role seems to be
The lack of retributive justice in this scene should not be attributed simply to the absence of boy-eating bears in Barcelona; a more likely reason is that there can be no divine punition in the novel if that genre really is—as it is viewed by Georg Lukács, who calls the *Quixote* its progenitor—"the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God." In the scene under discussion, as elsewhere in the *Quixote*, the god-forsakenness of Cervantes' world allows the carnival sense of "gay relativity" (Bakhtin) to assert itself in a way that was not allowed in the tale of Elisha's mockery. The same is true of what I deem to be the most perfect Renaissance specimen of the Bethel boys motif, which occurs in one of Cervantes' *Exemplary Novels* (*Novelas ejemplares*, 1613), "Man of Glass" ("El licenciado vidriera," literally, "The licenciante of glass"), a tale that rehearses the *Quixote*’s theme. Shortly after its hero, the student and peregrinator Tomás Rodaja, goes mad and becomes convinced that his body is made of glass, we are told of what happens whenever he makes an appearance in the city (in this case, Salamanca):

The small boys [los muchachos] surrounded him, but he held them off with his staff and urged them not to come near, saying that, being a man of glass, he was very delicate and brittle and they might readily break him. Young lads, however, are the most mischievous creatures in the world, and despite his screams and entreaties they began throwing stones and other objects at him to see if he really was made of glass as he insisted; but he cried so loudly and made such a fuss that adults came running up to scold the lads and punish them so that they would not do it again. One day when the urchins were annoying him more than usual he turned upon them.

"Listen, you boys," he said, "persistent as flies, filthy as bedbugs, bold as fleas, am I by any chance the Monte Testaccio of Rome that you should be throwing all these tiles and pieces of crockery at me?"

Since they enjoyed hearing his replies and his scoldings, the young ones continued to follow him about, until they came to prefer listening to him to throwing things at him.56

This incident displays the basic features shared by Elisha’s mockery outside Bethel and Don Quixote’s first humiliation in Barcelona: the

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eccentric man, the anonymous urchins, and their gratuitous tormenting of him. Moreover, there are noteworthy affinities between the two Cervantine scenes. The prefatory denigration here of boys as “the most mischievous creatures in the world” matches their condemnation in the _Quixote_ as being “worse than the devil.” But, like the _Quixote_’s narrator, who describes the knight’s tormentors as “audacious, mischievous,” Rodaja describes his own attackers as “bold as fleas,” a Homeric simile that not only bespeaks his classical education but also betrays his grudging respect for his tormentors—boys who, like those who played the trick on Don Quixote’s nag, apparently eschewed the attempt by some men to punish them. As if the boys’ avoidance of punishment were not, as it was in the _Quixote_, enough to confirm the absence of a Divine Chastiser, Rodaja turns on his assailants and berates them in a way that might be likened to Elisha’s curse (compare the phrase “he turned upon them[,] saying]” [“se volvió a ellos, diciendo”] with the Latin Vulgate’s rendering of 2 Kings 2:24: “Qui cum respexisset, vidit eos, et maledixit eis”); the obvious difference is that Rodaja’s disparaging words do not bring down the wrath of God upon the boys (a failure that again bespeaks the lack of divine retributive justice) but prove, instead, to give his tormentors all the more pleasure.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the bad boys motif in “Man of Glass” is the method of torment the urchins employ, which is the same that Lucian attributed to their biblical prototypes: stoning. Unbeknownst to Cervantes, the image of man-stoning boys was taken up around the same time by his English contemporary, William Shakespeare, in the latter’s _Coriolanus_ (written 1607–9): when its titular protagonist returns to Antium, the city for whose misery he is responsible, he comes in disguise, “Lest that thy wives with spits and boys with stones / In puny battle slay me” (act 4, sc. 4, lines 5–6).57 If the boys of Antium are like those of Shylock’s Venice, Coriolanus’s caution is well-advised; in _The Merchant of Venice_ (written 1596–98), after Shylock creates a public scandal over his daughter’s elopement and his loss of money, it does not take long for the local urchins to target him for ridicule. As Salerio observes, “Why, all the boys in Venice follow him, / Crying, his stones, his daughter, and his ducats” (act 2, sc. 8, lines 23–24). Conspicuously absent in these two Shakespearean lines is any hint that the anonymous boys in question might be punished for mistreating Coriolanus or Shylock; on the contrary, were the boys of Antium to stone the Roman general, they would be enforcing their

57 All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays will be from _The Riverside Shakespeare_ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
city’s majority sentiment, as the boys of Venice do by taunting the “hated Jew.”

Although Shakespeare nowhere adapts the Bethel boys motif in its full form, his plays’ scattered references to boys present a small grammar of negative imagery. Of course, the negative concepts of boys in Shakespeare and Cervantes directly contradict the heavenly notion of children espoused in the Gospels. In fact, it was during the time those two authors were writing, and the century following theirs, that what Ariès calls the “modern” idea of childish innocence began to evolve. Based on Jesus’ teaching, this idea was first propagated by seventeenth-century moralists and pedagogues, finding expression in such didactic treatises as François de Grenaille’s L’honneste fille (1639) and L’honneste garçon (1642) and Alexandre Louis Varet’s De l’éducation chrétienne des enfants (1666), as well as in the frequent recurrence in iconography from the late sixteenth century on of the biblical scene of Jesus’ asking for little children to be allowed to come to him.

The idea of childish innocence led to the association of childhood with primitivism and irrationalism that appeared with Rousseau’s Émile (1762), with its celebrated defense of the child in his natural state. Subsequently, as M. H. Abrams has shown, childhood was consecrated by the Romantic poets and theorists in Germany and England who equated the child with Adam in Eden and made the child’s “freshness of sensation” into the norm for adult artistic experience. That this Romantic trend introduced the child for the first time as an important and continuous theme in English and American literature is shown by Peter Coveney in his masterful study of the theme’s sentimental Victorian permutations in the works of such authors as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James, Mark Twain,

58 From Antonio’s string of unpleasant associations in Much Ado about Nothing (written 1598–99): “Boys, apes, braggarts, Jacks, milksops!” (act 5, sc. 1, line 91), to the Earl of Gloucester’s antithedoecean simile in King Lear (written 1604–5): “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, / They kill us for their sport” (act 4, sc. 1, lines 36–37), male children are presented as petty nuisances at best, and budding sadists at worst. One could distill from several of the history dramas a set of counsels to political leaders on the importance of remaining aloof from boys, who are characterized as “unrespective” (Richard III [written 1591], act 4, sc. 2, line 29) and associated with rebellion (see 2 Henry IV [written ca. 1597], act 4, sc. 1, line 35). Richard III’s decision in the afore-cited passage to converse with fools and boys is an omen of his imminent demise and, thus, supports the point King Henry meant to make when he cautioned his son against the example of his own predecessor (Richard II), who “gave his countenance, against his name, / To laugh at gibing boys” (1 Henry IV [written ca. 1597], act 3, sc. 2, lines 65–66). 59 See Ariès (n. 46 above), chap. 5 (“From Immodesty to Innocence”), pp. 100–127. 60 See M. H. Abrams, “The Poet’s Vision: The New Earth and the Old,” in Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 373–408.
and Richard Jeffries. 61 But it was in Russian literature, with Dostoevsky, that the theme of childish innocence reached its climax; as portrayed in Prince Myshkin of The Idiot (1869) and Alyosha of The Brothers Karamazov (1880), a joyful love of children and direct contact with them bespeaks a special sign of grace. 62 This view reflects not only the Romantic influence but also the fact that the Augustinian idea of “original guilt,” an idea accepted in Roman Catholic doctrine, had been rejected by most theologians in the Orthodox tradition to which Dostoevsky adhered. 63

Despite the sanctification of the child in the nineteenth century, when even a “bad boy” could be made to look good, 64 the Bethel boys motif survived as a testimony to the less pleasant implications of the

61 Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature, rev. ed. (1957; reprint, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1967). The original 1957 edition of this book was published by Rockliffe in London under the title Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature. For a somewhat different view, see Robert Pattison, The Child Figure in English Literature (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978). Pattison’s book, which was brought to my attention after I completed this article, examines a conjunction of the child figure in English Victorian literature and the concepts of the Fall and of Original Sin, finding that conjunction prefigured in Augustine and the controversy in the early Church over the definition of the human being’s fallen condition.


63 See Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church, rev. ed. (1963; reprint, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), pp. 227–30. The idea that children are born guilty is also rejected on rational moral grounds by Ivan Karamazov in his famous discussion with Alyosha in the fourth chapter (“Rebellion”) of bk. 5 (“Pro and Contra”) in pt. 2 of The Brothers Karamazov.

64 Thus in Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s novel The Story of a Bad Boy (first published as a book 1870), which Coveney does not mention in his study but which has been seen as an important precursor to Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1885), the hero’s self-portrayal hardly matches the negative expectations aroused by the book’s title: “Lest the title should mislead the reader, I hasten to assure him here that I have no dark confessions to make. I call my story the story of a bad boy, partly to distinguish myself from those faultless young gentlemen who generally figure in narratives of this kind, and partly because I really was not a cherub. I may truthfully say I was an amiable, impulsive lad, blessed with fine digestive powers, and no hypocrite” (Thomas Bailey Aldrich, The Story of a Bad Boy [1870; reprint, New York: Garland, 1976], p. 7). On the American reverence of the “Good Bad Boy,” from Huck Finn to Jack Kerouac, see Leslie A. Fiedler, “Good Good Girls and Good Bad Boys: Clarissa as a Juvenile,” and “Huckleberry Finn: Faust in the Eden of Childhood,” both in his Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), pp. 254–72 (esp. pp. 267–72), and pp. 553–91. According to Fiedler, “The Good Bad Boy is, of course, America’s vision of itself, crude and unruly in his beginnings, but endowed by his creator with an instinctive sense of what is right” (p. 268).
innate amorality in children that Rousseau had praised (see Émile, bk. 2). Even an author as consummately Romantic as E. T. A. Hoffmann could not resist in at least one instance drawing on the archetypal association of a pack of wild urchins with the demonic. In the opening scene of his tale “The Golden Pot” (“Der Goldene Topf” [1814]), where the clumsy student Anselmus knocks over the market-woman’s basket of apples, we are told that immediately the “urchins in the street [die Strassenjungen] joyously divided the booty that was thrown their way by this precipitous gentleman.”

Although these Dresden urchins promptly disappear, neither to be seen ever again nor to be included in the Äpfelweib’s subsequent curse of Anselmus, it is they who completed his perceived (albeit accidental) crime by making off with the apples, and therefore, through the associative process essential to Hoffmann’s narrative art, they may be implicated in the reader’s imagination with the sinister force of darkness represented by the hag. (After all, had their theft not precluded the possibility of her retrieving the apples, the curse might not have been necessary.)

As we saw earlier, the image of boys stealing fruit is a thematic sibling of the Bethel boys motif, finding its locus classicus in Augustine’s Confessions, and recalling Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit. While that image will recur over a hundred years later in Hermann Hesse’s Demian (1919), where it is again associated with evil, the next clear example of the Bethel boys motif appears much sooner. By the time the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard began writing and publishing his great series of pseudonymous works in the early 1840s he was too rebellious against German Romanticism, and too suffused with the Lutheran view of all children as creatures born of sin, to


66 In the opening chapter of Hesse’s novel, the fruit-stealing motif is transformed in such a way that the self-proclaimed thief is not an anonymous street urchin but the son of a well-to-do Pietist family, Emile Sinclair, and the theft of a sackful of apples that he claims to have committed with a friend did not actually occur but is a tale he concocts to impress his boyhood buddies. The connection with evil emerges when Sinclair afterward allows himself, because of his lie, to be blackmailed by the bully Franz Kroner, who represents the realm of darkness; through his involvement in that realm he finds himself hopelessly cut off from his former paradisiac life at home. While this episode from Hesse’s bildungsroman, together with “Der goldene Topf,” appeals to the biblical myth of the fall through unmistakable iconic imagery (as shown by Theodore Ziolkowski, “Religion and Literature in a Secular Age: The Critic’s Dilemma,” Journal of Religion 59 (1979): 18–34; see 30, 31–32), it also hearkens back to Augustinge’s peer-theft account, where the innate propensity of boys toward evil was first doctrinally established.

67 This notion is expressed, e.g., by both the aesthete and the ethicist of Kierkegaard’s Either/Or (1843). In the second paragraph of the Diapsalmata, the aesthete sarcastically cites the baby’s first babbling utterance, “da-da,” which in Danish also means “spanking,” as a symptom of “hereditary sin” (Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols. [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987],
accept the Romantics’ association of them with the innocent prefallen Adam. There are numerous allusions to “the child” and “children” in Kierkegaard’s corpus, and, to be sure, some of them reflect the attitude of Jesus; for example, in Stages on Life’s Way (1845), the “Married Man” (the ethicist Judge William) in his “Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections” can speak of Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit—presumably its first part (1811)—as recalling “childhood’s pious faith” and “childlike innocence.”68 But later, in “Letter to the Reader,” Frater Taciturnus (the “religious” spokesman) makes subtle use of the Bethel boys motif and its more cynical assumption about children. Commenting on the preceding section, “Quidam’s Diary” (the putative account of Kierkegaard’s disastrous love for Regine Olsen, entitled “‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”), Taciturnus calls the male character “mad,” and doubts that the latter would succeed in the real world as a faithful lover: “How funny it would be to see such a spook, troglodyte, or cave dweller come sneaking out after listening secretly to people’s romantic talk and claim to be an unhappy lover of the first rank! He would have the street urchins on his tail, that is certain.”69

Anticipating the comment Kierkegaard would make the year of his death (1854) that “it is sheer nonsense that [children] are supposed to be Christian,”70 the last line in the passage above presupposes that urchins as a type are instinctively drawn to eccentric persons to mock them. The kinship of this presupposition to the Bethel boys motif is suggested by the fact that Taciturnus, on the next page, compares the “mad” lover of “Quidam’s Diary” to Don Quixote, whose connection with that motif we considered earlier. As for Kierkegaard’s own attitude toward children, we may surmise that it was neutral; keenly aware of the tension between Jesus’ exultation of childhood and Paul’s denigration of it, he once recorded his belief that the way the adult judges his or her childhood provides a key to his or her whole personality.71

1:19). Judge William, the ethicist, makes essentially the same point, though more straightforwardly, when he emphasizes “that [the child’s painful birth] is declared as the universal destiny of humankind, and that a child is born in sin is the most profound expression of its highest worth, that it is precisely a transfiguration of human life that everything related to it is assigned to the category of sin” (Kierkegaard, pt. 2, pp. 91–92).


69 Ibid., pp. 400–401.


71 The section on “Childhood, Children” in ibid., 1:113–22, contains an entry of 1849 in which Kierkegaard sets the views of Jesus and Paul on children in opposition, declaring: “Just tell me how you judge your childhood and your youth, and I will tell you who you are” (1:121).
Since the late nineteenth century, modern psychology and such new and developing social sciences as anthropology, psychology, and criminology have produced theories of childhood and adolescence that are much more harmonious with the Bethel boys motif than had been the Romantic and Victorian views. In 1876, several decades before the impact of Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality and Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* (written 1872–84; published 1903) delivered the deathblows to the sentimentality surrounding the Victorian child, Cesare Lombroso published his *Uomo Delinquente* (Criminal man), whose reflections on criminality among children corroborates the imputation of a violent instinct to boys in the Lucianic version of 2 Kings 2:23–24. As a criminal anthropologist and leader of the so-called Modern Penal School, Lombroso argued that “the criminal instincts common to primitive savages would be found proportionally in nearly all children, if they were not influenced by moral training and example.” This association was taken up by G. Stanley Hall in his encyclopedic study *Adolescence* (1904), which established the modern concept of adolescence. Hall’s notion that the adolescent phase in human ontogeny “recapitulates” the atavistic stage in phylogeny greatly influenced the subsequent spate of studies on such “boy” problems as gangs and delinquency, and anticipated the emergence of the realistic portrayals of juvenile delinquents in the American novel beginning in the 1930s.

In the wake of the Nazi Holocaust and the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (catastrophes notorious for their blind

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73 Quoted from the English summary version of Cesare Lombroso’s *Uomo Delinquente* by his daughter Gina Lombroso-Ferrero, *Criminal Man, according to the Classifications of Cesare Lombroso*, with intro. by Cesare Lombroso (New York: Putnam, 1911), p. 130. For Lombroso, the child “represents what is known to alienists as a morally insane being, and to criminologists as a born criminal, and it certainly resembles these types in its impetuous violence” (pp. 130–31).


inclusion of infants and children among countless innocent victims),
the Bethel boys motif has recurred, ironically, in one novel by a Jewish
survivor of Auschwitz and in another by a Japanese Catholic, both of
whom are preoccupied by the “silence” and apparent absence of God
in the face of their protagonists’ unspeakable sufferings.

Elie Wiesel’s La ville de la chance (1962), known in English as The
Town beyond the Wall, recounts a series of significant scenes from the
childhood of a young Jewish concentration camp survivor named
Michael, which he recalls as he is being tortured in prison after secretly
returning to his hometown behind the Iron Curtain and being arrested
there. His earliest recollections, including the following one, involve
the village drunk, a madwoman known as Old Martha: “Michael is
entranced by the desiccated face. He has never seen her this way.
Children liked to run along behind her and throw stones at her, but as
soon as she turned they fled, an exhilarating terror prickling their
heels. She chased them hotly, shouting, ‘You’ll burn in hell. Your
children will die young. Your tongues will fall in the mud. And your
eyes with them.’”76

Here, as in our earlier examples of the bad boys motif, we find the
eccentric adult (only this time, a female), the anonymous children, and,
in accordance with Lucian, their stoning of her. While the words
“You’ll burn in hell” might at first glance seem no more consequential
than the oaths uttered by Cervantes’ “glass man” against his mockers,
or the attempt by Don Quixote’s conductors in Barcelona to punish his
tormentors, Martha’s execution takes on a chilling aura of effectuality
when it is considered that most if not all of the children she curses will
indeed end up burning in the “hell” of Nazi furnaces, the victims not of
God’s retributive justice but of His apparent and inexplicable refusal
to aid His chosen people during their time of ultimate need.

Shusaku Endo’s Silence (Chimoku [1966])—whose echoing of the
Bethel boys motif is not unique in modern Japanese fiction77—tells the
story of a seventeenth-century Portuguese priest, Sebastian Rodrigues,
who goes on a mission to Japan at the height of the terrible persecution

76 Elie Wiesel, The Town beyond the Wall, trans. Stephen Becker (1964; reprint, New
York: Schocken, 1982), p. 5. This scene is recalled in Michael’s monologue to his silent
cell mate near the novel’s end: “And in the wild countryside of some country just
awakening or just falling asleep there is a woman, some woman, being stoned for a
reason, some reason, and nothing can save her from human beings” (p. 176).
77 Yukio Mishima’s well-known novel The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea
(Gogo no Eiko, 1963), trans. John Nathan (New York: Knopf, 1965) has been compared
to Golding’s Lord of the Flies (discussed further later in this article) in its depiction
of adolescent violence. Its final scene, which involves the murder of a naval officer (Ryuji)
on the outskirts of Yokohama by a band of nihilistic thirteen-year-olds, might be seen as
an elaborate, philosophical variation on the Bethel boys motif.
of Christians there, only to be captured and forced to apostatize. Prior to his apostasy, as he is being marched by his captors on a bare-backed horse into the little town of Omura, he reflects upon the contrast between his present plight and the earlier period in Japan when Christianity was officially embraced:

Sometimes stones from the hands of children skimmed past his face as he was led along the long and narrow road. If Valignano was right, this Omura was the district upon which the missionaries had expended their greatest effort. It had had many churches and a seminary; the peasants and even the samurai “listened to our talks with great enthusiasm”—as Frois had put it in one of his letters. Even the feudal lords had become ardent Christians and he had heard that they were practically converted in a body. But now, when the children threw stones and the bonzes shouting in derision covered him with ugly spittle, there was no samurai amongst the officials who made any attempt to check them.  

The Bethel boys motif could not be clearer in this passage, with its Lucianic spectacle of unnamed Japanese children stoning the condemned, eccentric (i.e., white, Western, Christian) adult. What Rodrigues suffers here is part of his ongoing Christ-like Passion (“He simply closed his eyes and thought of the Stations of the Cross, one by one . . . a meditation calling to mind the details of the Passion of Christ”); the fact that he is abused by children in the same way that Elisha was reminds us once again of the medieval allegorists’ perception of the mocked prophet as a *typos* of Christ’s Passion. Moreover, by mentioning that the children’s stoning of Rodrigues is condoned by the local samurai, Endo’s narrator makes clear that these children, unlike Elisha’s mockers/stoners, but like Christ’s, Don Quixote’s, and Rodaja’s, will go unpunished. The same is true much later, when, in Nagasaki after his apostasy, Rodrigues is teased and stoned by children who are merely shooed away by a woman who happens to be present.

As these scenes from Wiesel and Endo testify, the bad boys motif of 2 Kings 2:23–24 still persists as a foil to the traditional Christian and Romantic notions of childhood that one finds reflected in such places

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79 Ibid., pp. 151–52.
80 “The children played, forming a row and staring at him as he leant against the window. ‘Apostate Paul! Apostate Paul!’ they kept shouting. Some of them even threw stones in through the window.

“ ‘Naughty children!’ It was the woman with long hair who spoke, turning to scold the children and chasing them away. With a sad smile he watched them run away” (ibid., p. 261).
as a French literary theorist’s *rêverie* of childhood as being “psychologically beautiful” and a reminder of “the beauty of the first things.”

Wherever our motif is found, it exposes the “savage” or even demonic impulse attributable to children when they are seen from an Augustinian viewpoint as acute reminders of Adam’s sin, rather than from Jesus’ perspective as embodiments of heavenly innocence.

It seems apt that one of the most pessimistic fictional exposés ever written of the alleged barbarism of young boys should be William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), whose title is a translation of the Hebrew “Baal-zebub,” a term used in 2 Kings 1:2 (and again in verses 3, 6, 16) as a derisive distortion of “Baal-zebul” (“lord of the divine abode” or “Baal the Prince”), one of the epithets for the god Baal, the rival of Israel’s God. Golding’s title may invoke the Satanic connotation that Baal-zebul later bears in the Synoptic Gospels (see Matt. 10:25, 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15–19) and that he retains in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. However, the titular connection between *Lord of the Flies* and the opening chapter of 2 Kings links that novel even more suggestively with the tale of Elisha’s mockery in the next chapter. In its depiction of prepubescent savagery free of any adult interference, Golding’s narrative shares with that story its wilderness setting and several other prominent traits: the boys’ constant jeering and name-calling (with the taunting of “Piggy” replacing that of “Baldhead”); their Lucianic violence (with stones and spears); their attack on a Christ-figure (with Simon, as he is commonly viewed by critics, replacing Elisha, as he was viewed by medieval allegorists); and the threat of a wild creature (with fear of an unseen beast replacing the attack by bears). Perhaps, contrary to the compelling thesis of at least one modern psychologist, the nature of children never changes; perhaps it is a timeless truth that boys will be boys, in the worst sense of the phrase.

*Bad Boys of Bethel*

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82 Anticipated by the unsentimental portrayal of children in Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929; later published as *The Innocent Voyage*), *Lord of the Flies* grimly parodies R. M. Ballantyne’s moralistic classic about castaway boys who behave admirably in their predicament, *The Coral Island* (1858).