



## Babies

From the essay “In Defence of Baby Worship” from *The Defendent*. 1903.

The two facts which attract almost every normal person to children are, first, that they are very serious, and secondly, that they are in consequence very happy. . .

The most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common sense. The fascination of children lies in this: that with each of them all things are remade, and the universe is put again upon its trial. As we walk the streets and see below us those delightful bulbous heads, three times too big for the body, which mark these human mushrooms we ought always to remember that

within every one of these heads there is a new universe, as new as it was on the seventh day of creation. In each of those orbs there is a new system of stars, new grass, new cities, a new sea.

. . . If we could see the stars as a child sees them, we should need no other apocalypse. . . We may scale the heavens and find new stars innumerable, but there is still the new star we have not found – [the one] on which we were born. But the influence of children goes further than its first trifling effort of remaking heaven and earth. It forces us actually to remodel our conduct in accordance with this revolutionary theory of the marvellousness of all things. We do actually treat talking in children as marvellous, walking in children as marvellous, common intelligence in children as

marvellous. . . [and] that attitude towards children is right. It is our attitude towards grown up people that is wrong. . .

Our attitude towards children consists in a condescending indulgence, overlying an unfathomable respect; [we reverence, love, fear and forgive them.] We bow to grown people, take off our hats to them, refrain from contradicting them flatly, but we do not appreciate them properly. . . If we treated all grown-up persons with precisely that dark affection and dazed respect with which we treat [the limitations of an infant, accepting their blunders, delighted at all their faltering attempts, marveling at their small accomplishments], we should be in a far more wise and tolerant temper. . .

The essential rectitude of our view of children lies in the fact that we feel them and their ways to be supernatural while, for some mysterious reason, we do not feel ourselves or our own ways to be supernatural. The very smallness of children makes it possible to regard them as marvels; we seem to be dealing with a new race, only to be seen through a microscope. I doubt if anyone of any tenderness or imagination can see the hand of a child and not be a little frightened of it. It is awful to think of the essential human energy moving so tiny a thing; it is like imagining that human nature could live in the wing of a butterfly or the leaf of a tree. When we look upon lives so human and yet so small. . . we feel the same kind of obligation to these creatures that [God] might feel. . .

But [it is] the humorous look of children [that] is perhaps the most endearing of all the bonds that hold the cosmos together. . . [They] give us the most perfect hint of the humor that awaits us in the kingdom of heaven.