

Rhetoric, Cognition, and Ideology in A. L. Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781)

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Abstract In this article I explore the possibility of a dialogue between cultural studies and cognitive science by proposing a “cognitive” reading of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s 1781 book *Hymns in Prose for Children*. Literary critics have pointed out that the tacitly catechistic mode of Barbauld’s *Hymns* implicates it in the eighteenth-century ideological project of socializing children, particularly those coming from working-class families, to their proper stations in life. I investigate possible cognitive underpinnings of one particular aspect of Barbauld’s “catechist,” namely its reliance on a functional approach to human beings (i.e., “children are made to praise God who made them”). I argue that, to get an integrated account of the rhetorical appeal and the ideological potential of such a functional approach, we should inquire into the ways it mobilizes the contingencies of our evolved cognitive architecture involved in our differentiation between natural kinds and artifacts.

Dr. Johnson did not approve of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s writings for children, less on account of his general dislike for people who wrote for “infants” than because he regretted her “voluntary descent from possible splendor to painful duty” (quoted in Ellis 1874: 75). As a well-educated, promising young author, she should have chosen a worthier field for her creative en-

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deavors, or as Johnson put it after reading the 1779 installment of her *Lessons for Children*:¹

Miss Aikin [A. L. Barbauld's maiden name] was an instance of early cultivation, but in what did it terminate? In marrying a little Presbyterian parson, who keeps an infant boarding-school, so that all her employment now is "to suckle fools, and chronicle small beer." She tells the children, "This is a cat, and this is a dog, with four legs and a tail; see there! You are much better than a cat or a dog, for you can speak." (Quoted in Boswell 1971 [1934]: 408–9)

Johnson refers here to A. L. Aikin marrying in 1774 the Reverend Rochemont Barbauld and moving with him to a small Dissenting congregation at Palgrave (Suffolk), where they managed a boarding school for boys. He goes on to imagine his chagrin had his (hypothetical) daughter thought of marrying "such a fellow" after receiving "such an education." Miss Aikin's intellectually degrading marriage seems to account for her attenuated literary ambitions.

Several of Dr. Johnson's friends (including Charles Burney and his daughter Frances) considered this comment unjust. Barbauld herself seemed unperturbed by criticism and in 1781 published her next book dedicated to the religious education of young children, *Hymns in Prose for Children*, which contains passages much like those that had irked Dr. Johnson in her *Lessons*. Referring to "young animals of every kind," she notes that they "may thank [God] in their hearts, but we can thank Him with our tongues; *we are better than they*, and can praise Him better" (Barbauld 1866 [1781]: 9, emphasis added). The birds "can warble," she goes on, "and the young lambs can bleat, but we can open our lips in His praise, we can speak of all His goodness" (ibid.).

The observations on the hierarchy of living things (warbling and bleating beasts versus articulate humans) that Barbauld stubbornly made in book after book and that Dr. Johnson thought the epitome of triteness have become a subject of renewed critical attention in recent years. Far from dismissing such observations as a sad symptom of a writer's intellectual inertia, scholars of eighteenth-century culture increasingly view them as complexly implicated in what Isaac Kramnick (1983: 40) broadly characterizes as the period's project of "socializing" children to the ideological creed of bourgeois society.² Alan Richardson (1989) points out that the dialogic structure

1. *Lessons for Children* came out in several installments: *Lessons for Children of Two to Three Years Old* and *Lessons for Children of Three Years Old* (1778), *Lessons for Children from Three to Four Years Old* (1779), *Lessons for Children* part 3 (1787), and *Lessons for Children* part 4 (1788).

2. See Alan Richardson 1994: 111 for a critique of Kramnick's vision of the *unified* bourgeois ideology.

of *Hymns* and the fixed character of the provided answers, for example, “But who is the shepherd’s Shepherd? who taketh care for him? . . . God is the shepherd’s Shepherd . . . he taketh care for all,” in fact align the book with eighteenth-century catechistic discourses (Barbauld 1866 [1781]: 12). The catechistic teaching method, with its stress on the “mechanical production of set answers, obedient behavior within the educational setting, and (for the lower classes) passive literacy,” engendered a system of education that remained a “means of maintaining class distinction rather than facilitating social mobility” (Richardson 1989: 853; 854–55). Indeed Barbauld’s (1866 [1781]: 46, 48) elegant rhetorical closures neatly translate into the hegemonic ones: “The father, the mother, and the children make a family; the father is the master thereof. . . . Many towns, and a large extent of country, make a kingdom . . . a king is the ruler thereof.”

One unexpected effect of situating Barbauld’s *Hymns* within the eighteenth-century catechistic tradition is that it nudges scholars toward a fresh assessment of the rhetorical undercurrents of the deceptively smooth surface of Barbauld’s narrative, an analysis that until recently seemed almost pointless. Barbauld’s reliance on common biblical imagery prompted some critics to call her scriptural emblems “conventional, explicated, and as familiar as the iconography of the cross” (Summerfield 1984: 237). Coupled with what Dr. Johnson saw as a dumbed-down style of writing, the conventionality of Barbauld’s iconography appeared to hold no surprises for students of eighteenth-century prose. I suggest, however, that the rhetorical appeal of *Hymns* resides not in the originality of its scriptural images (the originality that her intended three-to-five-year-old readers could hardly appreciate) but in the way Barbauld selects and juxtaposes the hymns, complementing and legitimatizing the ideological coercion implied by the book’s catechistic structure. With its series of leading questions and undeviating answers, the catechism seems to circumscribe intellectual (and ultimately political) initiative, indeed, to *define* what constitutes an acceptable initiative. So does Barbauld’s framing of particular biblical images, though in a much more subtle and practically imperceptible way. In what follows I argue that, by deploying a conceptual framework made available by recent theoretical breakthroughs in cognitive anthropology, we can get a more nuanced perspective of Barbauld’s rhetorical engineering. I particularly consider the key message of the first part of her *Hymns*—“Man is made to praise the God who made him”—and examine possible cognitive underpinnings of such a functional approach to human beings (Barbauld 1866 [1781]: 40).³

3. By referring to cognitive anthropologists and psychologists as a cohesive group, I dramatically downplay of course the fact that scholars working in the field of cognitive studies represent a broad variety of paradigms and frequently disagree with each other.

Before I proceed with my argument, however, I want to point out what, in my opinion, is at stake in investigating the cognitive aspects of the *Hymns*. It is my general contention that a cognitive approach can be useful in our analysis of ideologically charged cultural representations because part of the appeal of such representations comes from their ability to tap into certain cognitive contingencies that arise from the constant interplay between the human brain and its environment. As an effort to influence human beings, ideology will always be attuned to the intricacies of human cognition, and because of this the exploration of our cognitive makeup becomes increasingly important for scholars invested in cultural studies. Once literary critics, such as Richardson, have identified Barbauld's *Hymns* as participating in the eighteenth-century project of socializing children to their "proper" stations in life, we should move further and analyze the cognitive dimension of the ideological stance of her book.

Barbauld's (1866 [1781]: 1–3) book opens with the following paraphrase of the first chapter of Genesis:

Come, let us praise God, for He is exceeding great. . . . He made all things; the sun to rule the day, the moon to shine by night. He made the great whale, and the elephant; and the little worm that crawleth on the ground. The little birds sing praises to God, when they warble sweetly in the green shade. The brooks and rivers praise God, when they murmur melodiously amongst the green pebbles. I will praise God with my voice; for I may praise Him, though I am but a little child.

The governing theme of God's relationship with his creatures is introduced in this opening: God is a maker, and the objects of his craftsmanship ("all things," including birds, brooks, and children) praise him in their various ways. The second hymn makes the same point. After a lively description of blooming flowers, fruit trees, and sporting animals (goslings, chickens, lambs, butterflies), we are told that all living creatures "thank Him that hath made them alive" (8). In the third hymn Barbauld depicts in turn a rose, a lion, and the sun and then turns again to him who "made" (a word repeated five times in the course of this 342-word hymn) the rose, the lion, and the sun and whose beauty, strength, and glory vastly supersedes theirs. Hymn Seven reiterates the theme of God the maker: "we can praise the great God who made us" (36); "we that are so young are but lately made alive" (37); "He fashioneth our tender limbs, and causes them to grow; He maketh us strong, and tall, and nimble" (38); and finally, the phrase I see as a leitmotiv of this cluster of hymns, "man is made to praise God who made him" (40).

Thus in the first seven hymns children are portrayed as engaged (or encouraged to engage) in only one activity, praying and thanking God for making them. God on the other hand is presented as a skillful craftsman

responsible for producing a variety of living beings, including human children. Barbauld reiterates here the age-old paradigm describing the ideal relationship between God and his creatures. She echoes in particular John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where Adam implores Eve to "ever praise him" that "made us" (Milton 1993 [1674]: 96–97) and where Satan, remembering the "heav'n's matchless King" who "created" him, admits God's "service" was not "hard":

What could be less than to afford him praise,
The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,
How due! (Milton 1993 [1674]: 86)

Because the formula "man is made to praise God who made him" had long become an ethical and theological commonplace, a further query into why Barbauld decided to adapt it for her book seems superfluous. Yet as Oliver Morton (1997: 102) points out, the project of cognitive science today bears out William James's observation that "it takes mind debauched by learning to carry the process of making the natural seem strange so far as to ask for the 'why' of any instinctive act." Indeed, prompted by the availability of suggestive empirical data provided by cognitive anthropologists, we can look anew into the rhetorical appeal of the old adage about God's creatures praising their maker for Barbauld's audience of three to five year olds untutored in biblical and Miltonic imagery. The basic assumption behind such an inquiry is that any "natural" or instinctively "true" or "unarguably" commonsensical notion is not just a cultural or social construction but also a cognitive construction in that it exploits in particularly felicitous ways certain contingencies of our evolved cognitive architecture.

The concept of a cognitively constructed cultural phenomenon highlights the absurdity of the charge of "biological determinism" sometimes leveled against cognitive science. Once we become aware of the fact that during its million-years-old evolutionary history our brain learned to privilege certain ways of processing information and interpreting its environment, we gain the new freedom of questioning some of our hitherto unquestionable assumptions and a new platform from which to interrogate venerable social institutions. Consequently if we want to understand the appeal that the juxtaposition of these two ideas—God "fashioneth" children; children ought to pray to Him—had for Barbauld when she was writing her *Hymns*, it is not enough to say that it was a respectable literary and theological notion well suited for the implicit catechizing structure of her book. We should also inquire into the cognitive foundations of such a juxtaposition, an inquiry made possible by a series of suggestive studies of categorization, particularly of our differentiation between natural kinds and artifacts.

Based on a series of experiments conducted by developmental psychologists and cognitive anthropologists, Scott Atran (1990) posits that people tend to distinguish categorically natural kinds from artifacts and to perceive the former in terms of their undefinable “essences” and the latter in terms of their “functions.”⁴ For example, three-year-old children judge a skunk to be a skunk even when presented with it wearing a zebra “outfit.” The skunk seems to retain that underlying “skunkness” that makes it different from other animals. A tiger without legs is still a tiger, not a new species of animal. A log, on the other hand, is not judged as having any specific quality of “logness” about it; in fact it seems to change its “identity” quite often. *Depending on its current function*, it can be perceived as firewood, a bench, or a battering ram.⁵ A cup with a sawed-off bottom becomes a bracelet or a cookie cutter—nothing about it is perceived as intrinsically “cupful.” Atran (1990: 63) argues that a “cross-cultural predisposition (and possibly innate predisposition) to think [about the organic world in terms of underlying essences] is perhaps partly accounted for in evolutionary terms by the empirical adequacy that presumption of essence afforded to human beings in dealing with a local biota [flora and fauna].” Such a presumption “underpins the taxonomic stability of organic phenomenal types despite variation among individual exemplars” (6). In other words, our Pleistocene ancestors could make certain inferences about every new (previously unencountered) organic specimen if they could recognize it as belonging to a certain taxonomic category. For example, it would make sense to be wary of any tiger, not just the one who ate your cousin yesterday, because it is in the “nature” of tigers to prey on humans. Further a tiger with three legs would still be perceived as a tiger, not a new three-legged species of animal with unknown properties, because it is in the “nature” of tigers to have four legs and the exception on hand testifies only to the peculiar personal

4. See Frank Keil 1986, 1989, and 1994. Keil (1994: 247) suggests that “perhaps as early as the first year of life, children are able to adopt clear functional stances toward a variety of artifacts, where they clearly understand that various properties have purposes, and can invent new tools as well.” As Atran (1990: 50) reports, in another series of “transformation” experiments conducted by developmental psychologists, even three year olds “tended not to admit costume change (e.g., putting a horse in a zebra outfit) as a change of identity.” Atran (281) also mentions the findings of the study by Susan Gelman and Ellen Markman, in which four year olds “expected the ‘kind’ of thing something is—as indicated by being called ‘bird,’ ‘fish,’ ‘squirrel,’ etc.—to override misleading appearances in predicting the extension of its ‘inherent’ properties (e.g., what it eats, how it breathes, whether it has eggs or seeds inside, the nature of its eyelids and feet, but *not*, e.g., how much it weighs, how fast it moves, whether it is visible at night, etc.” See also Susan Carey and Elizabeth Spelke 1994.

5. Note that a log is a potentially ambiguous example. In its “former existence” (as an oak, for instance) it would be classified as an organic object and thus conceptualized in terms of its underlying essence rather than its function.

history of this particular exemplar. Atran (*ibid.*) points out that “*all and only* living kinds are conceived as physical sorts whose intrinsic ‘natures’ are presumed, even if unknown,” which means the set of inference procedures used to deal with living things is different from that for dealing with artifacts (*emphasis added*). This observation supports one of the most provocative assertions advanced by cognitive anthropologists today, namely that different cognitive domains have different architectures defined by their respective evolutionary histories. It is likely, for example, that the domain dedicated to processing information about living kinds is older than the domain that processes information about artifacts because of the phenomenal importance and variety of organic forms (as compared to artifacts) in early stages of human evolutionary history.⁶

Let me pause here and offer an important proviso about the described tendency to perceive living kinds in terms of their “essences.” Atran and his colleagues make clear that such a tendency does not reflect the actual existence of any underlying essences.⁷ What it reflects instead is the fact that for millions of years such “essentialism” might have served as a cognitive “shortcut” instrumental in helping our ancestors orient themselves amid the bewildering variety of natural kinds, including poisonous plants and predators. The ascription of imagined essences was useful for categorization and thus contributed to the survival of the human species. As such it was selected for in thousands of consecutive generations and became a part of our cognitive makeup. What it means is that it remains easy for us—though not at all necessary since nothing about it is “biologically determined”—to jump to essentialist conclusions when dealing with other human beings.⁸ Understanding our evolutionary history can thus help demystify some of our less appealing psychological reactions and avoid the epistemological cul-de-sac of viewing them as wholly socially constructed or wholly “natural.” In fact I believe that, if we want to challenge social institutions explicitly or implicitly upholding various forms of essentialism, we should investigate the ways the rhetorical practices of such institutions exploit this particular cognitive shortcut.

The proclivities to view natural kinds, such as animals and plants, as

6. See Keil 1994: 251 for a discussion of cognitive foundations of our learning about functional objects.

7. The folk attribution of imagined essences should be distinguished of course from the fact that, as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (1994: 101) point out, “the species-typical genetic endowments of species, and the common ancestry of larger taxa do cause an indefinitely large set of similarities to be shared among members of natural kind, as does a common chemical structure for different instances of a substance.”

8. See, for example, Lawrence Hirschfeld (1994), who suggests that it may partially account for racism and other unappealing embodiments of essentialist thinking.

“having invisible essences that cause their perceptual attributes” (Cosmides and Tooby 1994: 101) and human-made artifacts in terms of their intended function represent only two examples of what cognitive psychologists and anthropologists, such as Atran, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, Frank Keil, Dan Sperber, Pascal Boyer, Alan Leslie, and others, characterize as *domain-specific cognitive adaptations*. They suggest that such adaptations, that is, specialized information-processing cognitive mechanisms, evolved in response to the statistically stable features of problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors during the Pleistocene era. As it is beyond the scope of this article to do justice to their arguments, I focus only on the points I find particularly illuminating for my present analysis of Barbauld’s *Hymns*.

Cosmides and Tooby (1994: 87) point out that “for humans, the situations our ancestors encountered as Pleistocene hunter-gatherers define the array of adaptive problems our cognitive mechanisms were *designed* to solve, although these do not, of course, exhaust the range of problems they are *capable* of solving.” To put it starkly, a domain-specific cognitive adaptation that may have evolved a million years ago in response to the necessity to quickly identify the predator today participates in enabling us to process such complex cultural representations as poems and chess problems. I use the word *participates* to emphasize the fact that cultural representations draw not on one but on several different cognitive domains, activating respective inferences associated with those domains. Barbauld’s image of a child made to praise the God who created the child is an example of such a domain-crossing representation as it mobilizes structural properties of at least two cognitive domains, the one evolved to process information about natural kinds and the one evolved to process information about artifacts. The child, a living being, is characterized as being “made,” artifact-like, by the omnipotent craftsman. The effect of such characterization is that, because artifacts are typically viewed in terms of their intended functions, it becomes easier for readers to conceptualize the child as having a function—in this particular context the function of praying. Or to put it slightly differently, the importance and duty of praying are legitimized through the never explicitly articulated but nevertheless cognitively compelling appeal to structural properties *attributed* to “made” objects.

Cognitive scientists as well as literary scholars interested in cognitive approaches to culture offer several suggestive ways of theorizing our ability to process representations emerging at the intersection of several different conceptual domains, such as the one above. So Keil (1994: 252) thinks domain-specific cognitive mechanisms engage in “opportunistic” behavior, “constantly trying to find resonances with aspects of the real world structure. . . . Although [these domains] may have evolved in direct response to

the pressing needs of being able to learn quickly about particular [environmental patterns], it may also be part of their nature to be constantly seeking out new resonances with other sets of phenomena, hence our tendencies (often through metaphor) to anthropomorphize computers, to see personality in fluid dynamic terms, or see design in randomness.” In other words, think of the time you looked at the three roughly equidistant inkblots on a piece of paper and fancied you saw a face: two eyes and a nose. A cognitive anthropologist would argue that what is taking place at such moments is that a cognitive domain responsible for face recognition is reaching out and playing with its environment, checking if that random inky pattern can possibly satisfy the input conditions of the information (faces) this domain has evolved to process. Such a view agrees with Ellen Spolsky’s (2001) notion of the “hard-wired” flexibility and creativity of human cognitive processes and allows us to consider a literary text as a complex amalgamation of ontological violations, a carefully organized body of adventuresome attempts to reach out and establish new connections between different conceptual domains.

An important question at this point is whether or not Barbauld’s “domain-crossing” imagery somehow destabilizes our perception of ontological differences between natural kinds and artifacts. On the one hand, to answer the question in the affirmative would be to fall into the Piagetian trap of assuming that the child’s cognitive architecture is homogeneous across all cognitive domains and that the “differentiation or specialization of architecture is purely the result of psychological development and never initially its cause” (Leslie 1994: 122). According to this point of view, the peculiar crossing of domains observed in Barbauld’s *Hymns*, that is, the conceptualization of living beings as artifacts with an emergent function of praying, could “confuse” the child audience as to the categorical alignment of human beings. In fact exactly the opposite is the case. As Atran (1990: 217) points out, symbolic speculation (e.g., assertions of animism) is never confused, even by preverbal children with “commonsense knowledge of matters of fact.” If we adopt the cognitive anthropological perspective, we can say that Barbauld’s domain-crossing attribution is rhetorically effective because the cognitive domain dealing with living beings is structurally distinct from that dealing with artifacts and both of these domains actively recruit information from their environment that supports their respective “preconceptions” about the world. For example, seeing a bird fly reinforces our “innate,” for lack of a better word, expectation that living beings are self-propelling entities. A sight of a flying chair would be perceived as anomalous, that is, it would not be assimilated by the domains processing the information about artifacts and natural kinds as a matter of fact.

This view is supported by the fact that in spite of the presumed triteness of Barbauld's metaphor (i.e., children as artifacts) it remains a recognizable metaphor. No matter how frequently we encounter representations of "artificially" made human beings—in Barbauld's days such representations were provided by biblical and Miltonic discourses, to name a few—they still retain their shock value. This shock value is variously calibrated, depending on the cultural contexts in which those images appear, but the very fact that we never "get used" to them and continue to find their subject matter ontologically suggestive should give us some idea of the tenacity of the division between the cognitive domains that process information about natural kinds on the one hand and artifacts on the other.

Still, even if these images do not have the power to challenge our deep-seated perception of difference between natural kinds and artifacts as such, they can affect on other levels our conceptualization of represented specimens or groups of specimens. Coming back to Barbauld's image of children made to praise God who made them, outside of Barbauld's narrative, artifacts certainly remain inanimate objects that cannot praise God, and children remain living beings that cannot be characterized by a single unambiguous function. Nevertheless, however transitory in cognitive terms, the image of children made to serve certain functions still registers as an ideologically pregnant conceptual framework within which the objectification of human beings is a possibility.

Curiously the children in Barbauld's book pray to God because they are *able to do so* ("birds can warble, but we can open our lips in His praise"), *not* because prayer could procure them some benefits, for example, to make them stronger, happier, or more beloved in God's eyes. This turns out to be an important distinction for the following reason. Although the functional approach clearly appears to be more adequate when we deal with artifacts, certain properties of living things also invite functional explanations. The crucial difference between the kind of functional explanation applied to properties of living things and artifacts is, as Keil (1994: 237) points out, that the functional properties of living things have self-serving purposes ("rabbits have fluffy fur to keep themselves warm"), whereas the purposes for artifacts tend to be other-serving ("coats have fluffy polyester to keep people warm"). In other words, had Barbauld implied that children themselves benefit from praying, that their "function" of praying is *self-serving*, the emergent conceptualization of humans as "made [artifact-like] to pray" would have been compromised. This, however, never happens: children in her book pray because they "can," because they are "made" this way. The attribution of the "natural," unidimensional, unswerving function works particularly well in a text that seeks to develop children's knowledge

of God within strictly defined limits, a part of the larger, class-informed social project of guiding and containing literacy.⁹

The questions raised by the analysis of Barbauld's seemingly straightforward didactic maneuver, the insistence that children are "made" to praise God who made them, are thus far from trivial. They alert us to the untold complexities of the interactions between our evolved cognitive architecture and cultural representations and in particular to the cognitive foundations of ideologically charged rhetoric. It has been my contention that, in the case of *Hymns*, the ontological ambiguity arising out of the conceptualization of children as artifacts (i.e., in terms of their function) resolves itself ideologically. In fact it can be said that a functional approach can be easily mobilized to support ideological agendas because an argument that begins with the premise that some groups of people (social classes, castes, sexes) were "made" to perform certain duties implicitly taps our cognitive proclivity to associate "made" objects with certain rigidly defined functions.¹⁰

On the other hand, the same functional approach can work to heighten psychological tension in narratives that lack the ideological transparency of the catechist. Consider, for example, the suggestiveness of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which arises from the uncertainty of the ontological status of the Creature. Technically speaking he is an artifact, being literally "made" by Victor, and yet he remains functionless or unnaturally (humanly) multifunctional and thus threatening. By contrast, the figure of the Golem, yet another artificially produced creature, may be perceived as much less equivocal because it (mostly) sticks to its function of protecting the Jews of Prague and obediently exits when that function is fulfilled. By activating a host of conceptual inferences belonging to different cognitive domains, representations of artificially produced ("made") human beings present us with a cognitive challenge. We experience this challenge as an ambiguity, a creative opening, a promise of a potential that can be realized and interpreted differently depending on its specific cultural, ideological, and literary contexts.

Barbauld of course did not think in terms of natural kinds and artifacts when she wrote *Hymns*. For thousands of years writers and rhetoricians captivated the hearts and intellects of their audiences without the benefit of having cognitive scientists explain that what they do constitutes activating

9. See Richardson 1989 and 1994.

10. Consider, for example, an argument advanced in a different context in a book by Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998). Investigating the objectification of women in the increasingly commercialized world of the eighteenth-century novel, Lynch (1998: 166) uncovers the ideological implications of the reduction of people to "commodified still lifes."

“domain-specific” inferences. These cognitive operations run on such a fundamental level as to be practically imperceptible; even today little is known about their exact workings. Moreover trying to explain the intended rhetorical impact of her writings, an author can develop an intuitively appealing and ideologically suitable “prototheory” of the child’s cognitive development, and this theory could be based on assumptions that frequently run against those held by cognitive anthropologists today, which is largely the case with Barbauld.

Barbauld saw her *Hymns* as radically different from the “multitude of books professedly written for children” and yet “not adapted to the comprehension of a young child” (quoted in Ellis 1874: 101–2).¹¹ In the preface to her book, she obliquely criticizes her famous predecessor Isaac Watts, author of *Divine Songs for the Use of Children* (1715). Ironically Barbauld’s (1866 [1781]: v) characterization of Watts’s “Hymns for Children” seems to echo, in letter, not in spirit, Dr. Johnson’s earlier regrets that she chose the “painful duty” of writing for infants over the “possible splendor” of addressing a more sophisticated adult audience. She writes that Watts “is deservedly honoured for the condescension of his Muse, which was very able to take a loftier flight” (v). At any rate, Barbauld concludes, poetry is wasted on young readers. It should not “be lowered to the capacities of children. . . . They should be kept from reading verse till they are able to relish good verse; for the very essence of poetry is an elevation in thought and style above the common standard; and if it wants this character, it wants all that renders it valuable” (v). Another problem plaguing contemporary literature for children is, in Barbauld’s opinion, the unnecessary artfulness of story lines. She argues that a “connected story, however simple, is above [the] capacity . . . of a child from two to three years old” (quoted in Ellis 1874: 101–2) and only interferes with the grand project of impressing upon the child’s mind the “full force of the idea of God” (Barbauld 1866 [1781]: vi). It is much more beneficial, she contends, to connect “religion with a variety of sensible objects, with all that he sees, all he hears . . . and thus, by deep, strong, and permanent associations, [lay] the best foundation for practical devotion in future life” (vi). And (mark this, Dr. Johnson!), “the task is humble, but not mean; for to lay the first stone of a noble building, and to plant the first idea in a human mind, can be no dishonor to any hand” (quoted in Ellis 1874: 101–2).

At first glance Barbauld’s critique of competing books for children (those burdened with “connected stories” and/or poetry) seems rather conven-

11. I refer to the “Advertisement” for Barbauld’s *Hymns* as it appeared in her 1777 letter to her brother John Aikin.

tional. As early as 1712, William Jole (quoted in Demers 1993: 38) complained in *The Father's Blessing Penn'd for the Instruction of His Children* about what he perceived as the weaknesses of contemporary literature for children:

Of all the Books in print, I cannot find
One Godly Book exactly to my mind,
Meetly proportioned to Children's strength;
Some are too short, but most do err in length.

As Patricia Demers (1993) notes in her analysis of moral and religious literature for children to 1850, the situation did not seem to improve much by the close of the eighteenth century. In 1795 Dorothy Kilner, in her *First Principles of Religion . . .*, lamented the fact that “in a cause of such infinite moment, as implanting the first principles of religion on the minds of infants, no age has yet exerted themselves, or fixed on any *rational* plan of instruction” (quoted in Demers 1993: 39 [italics mine]).¹² A “godly” book, a book that answered the needs of a cause of “such infinite moment,” would be the one that could, in Lady Eleanor Fenn’s words in 1783, “catch [children] gently” by adjusting to their conceptual level and rendering them more pliable for further indoctrination (ibid.). Such a book would work early to impress upon the children the importance of, in James Talbott’s words of 1707, “Subjection to the Will of those that are more capable to govern and direct” them than the children themselves are, a fit preparation for future cheerful compliance with the will of their social betters (ibid.). Accordingly, when Barbauld censures the practice of presenting young children with literature presumably “above [their] capacity,” she reacts against among other things the social irresponsibility of untoward educators. The author who chooses to cloud the child’s mind with unnecessarily complicated notions instead of “catching” the child “gently” by tailoring the readings to the child’s cognitive development, misses the precious opportunity to inaugurate the child’s successful socialization to his or her station in life.

Apart from such political (and self-promotional) overtones, Barbauld’s discussion of contemporary children’s literature is interesting for its underlying assumptions about the cognitive capacities of very young children. Barbauld (1866 [1781]: vi) argues that the idea of God should be stripped of any extraneous embellishments and inculcated in the child’s mind on

12. Compare Kilner’s emphasis on the need for the “rational” plan for instruction with Barbauld’s 1781 assertion that “among the books composed for some use of children, though there are many, and some on a very rational plan, which unfold the system and give a summary of the doctrines of religion, it would be difficult to find one calculated to assist them in the devotional part of it” (1866 [1781]: b).

the level of immediate perception so, at some point, the child “never remembers the time when he had no such idea.” Each “sensible object, all that he sees, all he hears” should be conceptually mediated by religious thought and so thoroughly assimilated in the child’s mind that he or she will “see the Creator in the visible appearances of all around him” (ibid.). The danger of course is that as a result “his religious ideas may be mixed with many improprieties” (ibid.). But with time “his correcter reason will refine [those] away,” and the child will emerge awash in “that habitual piety, without which religion can scarcely regulate the conduct, and will never warm the heart” (ibid.). Even while her practical advice concerning the age at which the child should be exposed to religious ideas radically diverges from his, Barbauld seems to share John Locke’s (1988 [1690]: 319) associationist premise developed in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*: “Let custom from the very childhood have joined figure and shape to the idea of God, and what absurdities will that mind be liable to about the Deity!” Interestingly, Barbauld seems to assume that young children have no innate cognitive structures for concept formation. Thus catching the child at that tender age when the child is first ready to invest his or her mental representations of external objects with meaning, one can radically influence the structure of these representations or, to use Barbauld’s own words, “plant the first idea in a human mind.”¹³

From the perspective of cognitive analysis, Barbauld in *Hymns* does the opposite of what she thinks she is doing. In her “Preface” and “Advertisement” she implicitly represents the child’s mind as a blank slate liable to take in and to bear any inscriptions, however free-ranging and arbitrary, provided by the environment. At the same time one of the key “messages” of the first part of her book—children ought to pray to God because he made them—is grounded in our cognitive predisposition for conceptualizing living beings differently from artifacts. Barbauld’s “message” makes sense on what we may call an intuitive level precisely because her young reader’s mind is *not* a blank slate. It is rather an infinitely complex agglomeration of cognitive susceptibilities adapted in the process of human evolution to recognize and interpret (and, unavoidably, misinterpret) environmental stimuli according to the perceived properties of those stimuli. For example, when the properties of a given object (in *Hymns*, the child) seem to satisfy the input conditions of the domain of artifacts (the child was “made”), certain inferences associated with the domain of artifacts (e.g.,

13. We find various forms of the modern development of this theory in the work of Jerome S. Bruner, Jean Piaget, and L. Vygotsky. See Bruner et al. 1966; Inhelder and Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1986.

“artifacts have functions”) will be activated, and the reader will be favorably disposed to consider claims about the uniformly defined “function” of this object (here the function of praying).

Consequently it is unlikely that a child would be equally open to associate just about *any* “absurdity” with the “idea of God.” Some “absurdities” will be more cognitively felicitous than others and thus will be remembered better and picked up by other members of a culture more readily. As cognitive scientists, such as Cosmides, Tooby, Boyer, and Sperber, suggest: “The assumption that mental representations with different content are equally easy to transmit is false. Representations whose content taps into a domain for which we have specialized mechanisms will be transmitted very differently than representations whose content does not tap into such a domain” (Cosmides and Tooby 1994: 108).¹⁴ Independently from the writer’s awareness of her or his own and the readers’ fundamental cognitive processes, the writer has to mobilize our domain-specific cognitive architecture in the attempt to influence readers. The implicit appeal to evolved cognition thus emerges as one of the crucial elements of a rhetorically compelling and ideologically suggestive literary endeavor.

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14. See Sperber 1997 on the “epidemiology” of culture and Boyer 1996 on the transmission of religious beliefs.

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