

FROM CONFUSION TO LOVE: RUSSELL HOBAN'S *THE MOUSE AND HIS CHILD* AS
PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOVEL

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Abstract

Russell Hoban's famous children's novel, *The Mouse and His Child*, centers around a child's quest for family, community, and self-awareness. This paper works to describe the novel as philosophical insofar as the novel takes up themes and elements of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay "The Child's Relations with Others." Because the mouse and his father are joined at the hands, because they find their motion to be a problem, and because they work through ambiguity toward a loving community, the novel puts particular emphasis on what Merleau-Ponty calls intercorporeality and the way a child's perception of ambiguity can lead to a non-pathological engagement with others in a loving, thoughtful way. Ultimately, this paper argues that the novel ought to be read and taught to children because it represents to them the emotion, language, and desire of a child as being a catalyst even for adult growth.

Key Words: Child Perception, Intercorporeality, Merleau-Ponty, Child-adult Relations

De la confusión al amor: *El ratón y su niño* de Russell Hoban como novella filosófica

Resumen:

La famosa novela para niños de Russell Hoban, *El ratón y su Niño*, se centra alrededor de la búsqueda de un niño por una familia, comunidad y autoconciencia. Este trabajo se propone describir esta novela como filosófica en la medida que retoma temas y elementos del ensayo de Merleau Ponty "Las relaciones del niño con los Otros". Debido a que el ratón y su padre se unen, porque encuentran que lo que los mueve es un problema y trabajan a través de la ambigüedad hacia una comunidad amorosa, la novela pone un énfasis particular en lo que Merleau Ponty llama intercorporalidad y la forma de la percepción del niño de la ambigüedad puede conducir a un compromiso no patológico con los otros de una forma amorosa, reflexiva. Finalmente este trabajo sostiene que la novela debe ser leída y enseñada a los niños, ya que representa para ellos la emoción, el lenguaje, el deseo de un niño como catalizador para el crecimiento, incluso de los adultos.

Palabras Llaves: Percepción del Niño, Intercorporalidad, Merleau-Ponty, Relaciones Adulto-Niño.

Da confusão ao amor: *O rato e sua criança* de Russell Hoban como novela filosófica

Resumo:

A famosa novela para crianças de Russell Hoban, *O rato e sua criança*, se centra em volta da busca de uma criança por uma família, comunidade e autoconsciência. Este trabalho se propõe descrever esta novela como filosófica na medida em que retoma temas e elementos do ensaio de Merleau-Ponty "As relações das crianças com os Outros". Devido ao fato que o rato e seu pai se

unem, porque descobrem que o que os move é um problema e trabalham através da ambiguidade até uma comunidade amorosa, a novela põe ênfase particular no que Merleau-Ponty chama intercorporeidade e a forma da percepção da criança da ambiguidade pode conduzir a um compromisso no patológico com os outros de uma forma amorosa, reflexiva. Finalmente, esta trabalho sustenta que a novela deve ser lida e ensinada às crianças, já que representa para elas a emoção, a linguagem, o desejo de uma criança como catalizador para o crescimento, inclusive dos adultos.

Palavras-chave: Percepção da criança, Intercorporeidade, Merleau-Ponty, Relações Adulto-Criança.



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PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOVEL

From its initial publication, Russell Hoban's 1967 novel, *The Mouse and His Child*, has generated a good deal of discussion as to whether or not it is a piece of children's literature.¹ Even if its subject matter is difficult to characterize, however, I think it fits the definition of a philosophical novel for children for two reasons. It is philosophical, first of all, because it presents the mouse child as what Gareth Matthews would call a "partner in inquiry" about the very issues of death and parental fallibility.² It is philosophical, second, because much of the progress that the protagonists make arises out of their encounters with philosophical characters—e.g., Aristotle and Aquinas in Muskrat and Turtle form.³

As a philosopher, I read this novel as allowing children to perform a phenomenology of their own lived experience. I read it this way because I hear in the novel so many echoes of key moments in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay, "The Child's Relations with Others." What I shall do in this paper, then, is describe these echoes and show the alliance between the novel and Merleau-Ponty's descriptions.

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Childhood Relation

First, and foremost, Merleau-Ponty's essay describes the post-natal development of the infant's perception of human bodies, of language, and of intercorporeality.

¹ Even Hoban was not sure it was a children's book per se: "Most adult books are about clockwork dolls who copulate. *The Mouse and His Child* happened to be about clockwork mice who walk and therefore it is a children's book....Books in nameless categories are needed—books for children and adults together, books that stand in the middle of an existential nowhere and find reference points". See, Christine Wilkie, *Through the Narrow Gate: The Mythological Consciousness of Russell Hoban* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 21.

² Gareth Matthews in *Philosophy of Childhood* makes two further important claims. First, he says that "one of the exciting things that children have to offer us is a new philosophical perspective". And second, Matthews argues that books that deal directly with death are helpful for children and for adults who read with and to them: "If we can learn to deal honestly with that threat and to deal respectfully as well as lovingly with such a child [with a terminal illness], we will have taken a major step in the development of our own maturity". See, Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 14, 101.

³ Hoban, in his interview with Christine Wilkie, notes that *The Mouse and His Child* turned out more philosophical than he intended: "although they [the characters] didn't know it, and I didn't know it—being was seeking them out. That is, the being that wants action, the being that wants everything to go as far as it can, was motivating them to go as far as they could and become self-winding". See, Wilkie, *Through the Narrow Gate*, 101.

Second, the essay imparts, perhaps implicitly, the value of phenomenological method insofar as it promotes an attitude that can help adults learn how to help children move through psychological impediments toward a loving engagement with others.⁴ In this section, I will summarize and briefly comment on these two tasks that Merleau-Ponty's essay takes on.

A. The Child's Perception

As Merleau-Ponty describes the development of a child's perception of embodiment, he carefully anchors his discussion with the following: "perception in the child is not a simple reflection nor the result of a process of sorting data. Rather, it is a more profound operation whereby the child organizes his experience of external events—an operation which is neither a logical nor a predicative activity."⁵ The organization going on in a child's perception is not a simple reflection. It is *pre-reflective*, and, as such, it is *sui generis*. Nevertheless, and indeed *because* of its pre-reflective, *sui generis* character, the structure of the child's perception is profound and intimately geared toward an adult's.

One of the ways in which a child's perception is profound is in its entwining with a sense of the child's own developing body and body schema: "The consciousness of one's own body is thus fragmentary [*lacunaire*] at first and gradually becomes integrated; the corporeal schema becomes precise, restructured, and mature little by little".⁶ In short, then, a child's perception is given not just as its own operation but also as occurring within and *as a body that is re-organizing itself*. There is a co-functioning that one must highlight. The child's *perception* transcends her body and pushes for further

⁴ Matthew Lipman's exhortation in *Philosophy in the Classroom* to teachers is something I think Merleau-Ponty would find appropriate, given his phenomenological description of a child's affective life. When a child asks what death is, Lipman says we should appreciate that, "the fact that children can raise such questions indicates that they begin with a thirst for holistic explanations, and it is patronizing, to say the least, not to try to help them develop concepts equal in generality to the questions they ask". See, Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 29. Pair this statement of Lipman's with the opening of the *Mouse and His Child*, where the mouse child searches for such holistic explanations, and one can see the relevance of the novel to teaching philosophy to children almost immediately.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans., William Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 98.

⁶ *Ibid*, 123.



development of the body as a whole; the child's *body* transcends her perception and pushes for perception to re-integrate and re-organize experience. What is also central for Merleau-Ponty in this process of self-organizing perception is the way in which it develops within the context of *intercorporeality*: "the perception of one's own body creates an imbalance as it develops: through its echo in the image of the other, it awakens an appeal to the forthcoming development of the perception of others".⁷ The gap in one's perception is also an imbalance and a call for resolution within familial and social engagement.

Merleau-Ponty states this point about the child's perception developing by way of her involvement as a phenomenon of coupling or pairing: "the perception of others is like a "phenomenon of coupling" [*accouplement*]...In perceiving the other, my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them".⁸ Something about the embodiment of a child participates, just as it did in the character of pre-reflective self-organization, in the adult situation of being paired with others. *A perception of another's body couples our actual bodies* and this intertwining of perception and embodiment leads to "a sort of action."

There are two key examples from the essay that show these points together, the way in which perception and body work by transcending each other in the child, and the way in which the child's perception and embodiment call to that of the others with whom she is paired. The first example is that of the infant seeing the parent and yet not *immediately* himself in the mirror. Indeed, we do not see ourselves in the mirror until after we experience, perhaps pre-reflectively, that we can be seen by others: "through the acquisition of the specular image the child notices that he is *visible* for himself and others".⁹ To see oneself in the mirror, then, is to perceive by means of an intercorporeal relationship where others see oneself differently.

The second example, that of the girl seeing her own situation clearly in the dog's nursing its young, shows concretely how the child's experience of her embodiment is

⁷ *Ibid*, 121.

⁸ *Ibid*, 118.

⁹ *Ibid*, 136.

carried forward by her larger, familial involvements: "Meeting the dog which was nursing its litter was not an indifferent experience for the child; it was a visible symbol of something analogous that was about to happen in her own world....The sight of the dogs was of paramount significance by virtue of the relation to the situation in which the child was about to find herself".¹⁰ It is not only, then, that the child's perception has gaps that gear into and *call for* increasingly sophisticated relations with others. Rather, the child's perceptions of (and on behalf) of others *enact as if on their own* increasingly sophisticated and symbolic perceptions of (and relations with) her future and herself.

B. Pre-Maturation, Ambiguity, and Love

Because she can perceive symbolically, on behalf of her future, a child's perception is always characterized by a kind of "pre-maturation": "pre-maturation, the anticipation by the child of adult forms of life, is...almost the definition of childhood.... The child lives in relations that belong to his future and are not actually realizable by him".¹¹ Whatever way in which we work to describe childhood phenomenologically, then, we must allow that children perceive and act toward philosophical positions that are far richer than we might be prepared to believe. The child does not, in other words, just *happen* to articulate philosophical insights. She *lives* them.¹²

What can prevent the child from enacting the kind of growth that allows *pre-maturation* to turn into more self-aware maturation is a kind of psychological rigidity. This rigidity, which the child would receive from within her place within a problematic family situation, prevents the child from perceiving ambiguity as the motor of perceptual life. When, instead of rigidity, the child lives in a family that promotes the perception of ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty says, the child can perceive the "phenomena of transition"¹³ and move from the confusion of herself and others towards a clearer sense

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 138.

¹² I discuss this operative motif within Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad stories. See, Peter Costello, "Gift-giving, Waiting, and Walking: The (Non-)reciprocal, (Im-)possible Apprenticeship of Frog and Toad", in *Philosophy in Children's Literature*, ed. P. Costello (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 153-74.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," 105.



of how her self-awareness can be situated within creative, mutual relationships of love.¹⁴ Within a helpful familial structure that embraces ambiguity, the child can stop searching for ‘proofs’ of love from a parent and start dwelling in the actions that are made possible by their relations.

Ultimately for Merleau-Ponty, a child whose perceptual, bodily, affective, and situational involvements allow for ambiguity can move toward a “nonpathological attitude” which has “confidence above and beyond what can be proved, in resolutely skirting these doubts that can be raised about the reality of the other’s sentiments, by means of the generosity of the praxis, by means of an action that proves itself in being carried out”.¹⁵ A child, in other words, can take on a healthy phenomenological attitude if the child’s pre-mature abilities are matched with the kind of discernment that addresses her emotional needs and expressions.

The Mouse and His Child

A. Summary

The Mouse and His Child is a story of two wind-up toys, a father and son, who are welded together at the hands. They arrive at a toy shop in the Christmas season and are placed in the window in order to display their motion—that of dancing in a circle with the father lifting the son higher as he turns. The mechanism for both toys is in the father’s body.

The pair of wind-ups are sold to a family whose children are expressly told not to play with them. And indeed the notion of injunctions or laws, especially as given to children, runs throughout the story. The father and son begin to have adventures, however, when the son breaks those laws by crying on the job and by asserting his own thinking against the rigid, rule-bound character of the toy world. Because of the child’s crying, the cat knocks them over and smashes them, they are thrown away, and a tramp

¹⁴ See, D.W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-34. On the relationship between toys, transition, and reality, see, Kristen Jacobson, “Heidegger, Winnicott, and *The Velveteen Rabbit*: Anxiety, Toys, and the Drama of Metaphysics,” in Costello, ed., *Philosophy in Children’s Literature*, 1-20.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relation with Others,” 155.

repairs them so that they no longer turn in a circle but instead move linearly, with the father pushing the son backwards.¹⁶

The novel ends, after many encounters with both wind-up toys and living animals, when the father and son have been split apart after a second fall and have been repaired and improved by their animal friends a second time so as to be self-winding. But this improvement, this achievement of being self-winding, ultimately seems less important to the two mice than the establishment of a community of beloved friends and scholars with whom they have shared their way.

C. Emotion as Intercorporeal Motor

The novel begins with a pair of philosophical questions. After the mouse and his child are first removed from their box, the child asks: "Where are we?" and then "What are we, Papa?"¹⁷ The father mouse replies that he does not know, but then says "We must wait and see".¹⁸ In his response, the father offers no ready-made answers. He offers ambiguity and a path toward a shared act of waiting and perceiving together.¹⁹

But one of the obstacles to their moving forward, after they fall, are damaged by the cat, and put back together (now with a linear motion) by a kind tramp, is that only the father gets to see where they are going. This problem is expressly acknowledged by the father in a way when the father says "Our motor is in me. He fills the empty space inside himself with foolish dreams that cannot possibly come true"²⁰ Of course, the irony here is that the father does not yet see that self-motion is not only self-loco-

¹⁶ Maria Nikolajeva notes that it is precisely the opposition of circular and linear motion in the novel that drives the novel's complexity: "Going out is linear, dancing in circles by definition circular; this contradiction sets up the whole movement of the book". See, Maria Nikolajeva, "Toward Linearity: A Narrative Reading of *A Mouse and His Child*," in *Russell Hoban/Forty Years: Essays on His Writings for Children*, ed., A. Allison (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 65. I might note that Nikolajeva seems to downplay the long moments of being still—in the box before the toys are unpacked; in the pond before the insight into what is behind infinity, etc.

¹⁷ Russell Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John Stephens acknowledges the philosophical importance of these questions early on in the novel. Stephens classifies this as a "modernist" novel with a "modernist conception of subjectivity, but now with a strong emphasis placed on the dependence of selfhood on intersubjective relationships". See, John Stephens, "Questions of 'What' and 'Where' and Contexts of 'Meaning' for *The Mouse and His Child* in the Late 20th Century," in A. Allison, ed., *Russell Hoban/Forty Years: Essays on His Writings for Children*, 47.

²⁰ Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child*, 35.



motion. The gaps or lacunae in the child, and his resistance to his father, indeed the child's enforced backwards-glimpse, are really what gear them both into new situations. And the child's efforts to hold onto the hope of real community will finally cause the father to retrieve, as if for the first time, an increased measure of suppleness and appreciation of ambiguity.

By means of the child, then, who has silently held onto his dream of a re-constitution of the initial toy shop family/community, both of them grow. And the father is amazed as he too grows, for he realizes that it means that the child lives this dream of family/community, and the persistent optimism that the dream demands, as a pre-mature, yet real, shape of *both of their* present and future perceptions. The child's emotional life gradually reveals itself, then, as an intercorporeal structure, as a motor that has lasted years without any need for winding.

D. Paired and Broken—the Move Toward Ambiguity and Love

If, as Merleau-Ponty claims, "the intellectual elaboration of our experience of the world is constantly supported by the affective elaboration of our inter-human relations", then it should be possible to show in the mouse child's development a radical shift in his perceptions and speech after he is broken apart from the father.²¹ Certainly the image of the father and son joined at the hands is one of a very intense and specific kind of coupling or pairing. But the gaps within the child, and the difference in position that they occupy while moving, whether in a line or a circle, promote a kind of growth. When the father and son are stuck on the bottom of the pond, the father despairs. The world just is the pond. There is no way out. However, the child refuses this rigidity. Within a profound appreciation of the ambiguity of his experience, it is the child who declares that "If I'm big enough to stand in the mud all this time and contemplate infinity...I'm big enough to look at the other side of nothing".²²

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," 112-13.

²² Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child*, 110.

And with that, when the label is removed from the can of dog food with its infinitely repeating dog images, the child finds their reflection. He sees the label's image of the infinitely repeating dog like the girl in Merleau-Ponty's example, as revelatory of his own situation. Furthermore, when staring at the reflection in the dog can when the label is removed, like Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the mirror, the child discovers his own reflection through the father's image: "he had never seen himself before, but he recognized his father, and therefore knew himself".²³ It is this seeing of his whole situation in the label's removal, of the whole of himself in relation to his father's reflection in the bare can that allows the child to see how to get out of the pond. There is "us" on the other side of nothing. *We are*. And he carefully executes their escape.

But the way out of the pond involves tragedy and dislocation. It involves the end of a certain perception of family. The child orchestrates their fall from the talons of a hungry, though somewhat obtuse, hawk. And in so doing the child wills their demise as a couple. Even in so doing, however, he retains the meaningfulness of their prior attachment, as just before they fall, he says to his father, with all the profound care and impotence of a parent: "I've got you! You won't fall"²⁴

When a moment later the coupling is broken, the segregation that they experience is profound: "the dump leaped and shuddered in their vision as the impact broke their grip on each other's hands, split their bodies open, and flung them violently apart. The scattered pieces of the mouse and his child lay on the path...and they saw and heard no more".²⁵ However, this segregation is not absolute; rather it is repaired and made sense of. It inaugurates a community in which neither segregation nor union is ever complete.²⁶ In fact, after the fall, what now finds its way into their lives is their

²³ *Ibid*, 111.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 118.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 119.

²⁶ As Merleau-Ponty notes, "there is a first phase, which we call pre-communication, in which there is not one individual over against another but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life. Next, on the basis of this initial community, both by the objectification of one's own body and the constitution of the other in his difference, there occurs a segregation, a distinction of individuals—a process which, moreover, as we shall see, is never completely finished". Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," 119.



greater and more intimate community and co-perceptions by means of the mediation of their shared friendships.

Unlike the communities, then, of the toy shop or the mob-like dump, the community that the mouse and his child work together to form is no longer simply about protection and profit. This community is richer and *sui generis*: “something new and different emerged from the concerted efforts of the little family”.²⁷ What was to be a home turns to a hotel; what was to be a refuge from war turns into education. And they are reminded that what joins the community together is not an easily manipulated notion of familial roles (uncle, sister, mother, father, son, daughter) but “good *friends* to wind you”.²⁸

Within the newness of their community, the Mouse and His Child now declare that they “aren’t toys anymore...toys are to be played with, and we aren’t...Now we have come to that place where the scattering is regathered”.²⁹ There is a ‘we,’ a love that proves itself in its history and its praxis, by means of their relations with other characters. And it is these larger sets of relations that allow them to go beyond the relation of original and copy, of originator and issue in their relation with each other. Theirs is now a ‘we’ that implies shared perception of suffering, of endurance and that that gives them the possibility of loving—loving others outside the family and loving the fact that they are a new, singular kind of thing.

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²⁷ Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 161.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 131.