THE IMAGINATION IN CHILDHOOD.[1]

BY CHARLOTTE MASON.

We are sorry not to be able to reproduce the whole of the article contributed to the *Times Educational Supplement*, November 2nd, by Dr. Montessori, but the following extracts indicate her argument sufficiently to enable the reader to follow the reply:—

> "This infantile characteristic also gave rise to the generalization of a materialistic idea now no longer held. 'Ontogenesis resumes phylogenesis'—that is, the life of the individual reproduces the life of the species, and thus the life of civilization is reproduced in man, and therefore there are found in the little child psychic characteristics peculiar to savages. For this reason the child, like the savage, is fascinated by the fantastic, the supernatural, the unreal.
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> "Rather than give utterance to similar flights of a scientific fantasy, it is simpler to note that an organism still immature like that of a child may distantly resemble mentalities less mature than our own, like that of savages. But, allowing those who interpret infantile mentality as the 'savage state' to keep their beliefs, the objection can still be raised that in any case, this savage state being a passing state and one which has to be overcome, education must help the child to pass through this. It should not develop the savage state or hold the child back in it." …
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> "Who has not seen a child ride horseback on his father's cane, switching as though he were mounted on a real horse? Behold a proof of imagination in the child! What pleasure children take in making a wonderful coach by putting chairs together, and while some stretched out inside joyously look at an imaginary landscape or greet an applauding crowd, others, perched on the back of the chair, whip the air as though driving fiery steeds! Again, proofs of imagination.
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> "But let us observe rich children, who possess docile ponies and habitually ride in a carriage or automobile. They would look with a sense of disdain at the child running about, furiously whipping a cane; they would be astonished to see children so happy under the delusion that they were being carried along by stationary chairs. They would say of such children, 'They are poor and do this because they have no horses or carriages.' An adult becomes resigned, a child deludes himself. But that is not a proof of imagination; it is the proof of an unsatisfied desire." …
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> "Some of the Froebelian games are based on like beliefs. The child

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> is given a block and is told 'This is a horse.' Then other blocks are arranged in a certain way, and he is told 'This is a stable. Now let's put the horses in the stable.' Then the blocks are arranged in still other ways. This is a tower; this other the village church, &c. In such exercises the objects (blocks) lend themselves even less to the illusion than in the case of a cane used as a horse, where the child at least does mount and move about and whip his horse. To make towers and churches out of the blocks which were first horses brings about the extreme of mental confusion. Furthermore, in this case, it is not the child who 'imagines spontaneously' and works with his own brain. He must picture

for himself what the teacher tells him at that particular moment. Though he is not quiet, though he really thinks that the stable has become a church, or though his attention may be wandering, certainly he would like to move about, and he cannot because he must watch that sort of cinematograph which the teacher names in rapid succession, but which, alas! is composed of pieces of wood, each like the other. What is nurtured in this way in such immature minds?" …

"It is we alone who imagine, and not they; they merely believe; they do not imagine. Credulity is indeed a characteristic of the immature mind which is lacking in experience and in a consciousness of realities where there is a want of an intellect which can distinguish the real from the unreal, the beautiful from the ugly, the possible from the impossible. Do we perchance wish to develop credulity in our children only because, in a stage where they are naturally ignorant and immature, they show themselves credulous. Certainly credulity may exist even in an adult, but then it is in opposition to the intellect, and it is neither its basis nor its product. Credulity germinates in the state of intellectual darkness, and we are glad to have superseded that stage. We cite credulity as evidence of the lack of civilization." …

"Is it perchance this illusive imagination founded on credulity that we wish to develop in the children? Surely not; it is not our wish that such a condition should continue. In fact, when the child 'no longer believes in the stories,' we are delighted and then we say 'He is no longer a child.'" …

"To retard one stage of development artificially and amuse oneself thereby—as in the ancient courts, where they were wont to arrest by artificial means the growth of some poor victims in order to make dwarf jesters for the king—this is one of the unnoticed faults of our times. This assertion may seem harsh, but it states a real fact. We are unconscious of it, it is true, and yet we speak of it constantly, when we say, with such disdain for the immature age, 'We are not children.' If we did not arrest the child's immaturity in order to contemplate this inferior stage, but instead would give freedom for his growth, admiring the marvels of his perfecting of himself always in the way of greater conquests, then we would say of him as did Christ, when He said that he who would be perfect should become as a little child. …

"*That faith which is true is the basis of religion*. I have often been told that the education of the imagination founded on this basis of fantasy 'prepares the soul of the child for religious education,' and that an education based on reality, such as this method would desire, is too arid and dries up the spiritual springs. Such reasoning, however, cannot be shared by religious persons; for they well know that myth and faith are at opposite poles, and that, though the myth must cease to be real as soon as the child's mind matures, faith must accompany man to the end of life.

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"Religion is not the product of a fantastic imagination; it is the greatest reality, the only truth for the religious man. It is the fount, the support, of his life. The man who is not religious is certainly not one lacking in imagination, but rather lacking in inner poise. In comparison with the religious man, he is less serene, less strong in misfortune, and not only that, but he is more vacillating in his own ideas. He is weaker, more unhappy, and in vain does he cling to his imagination in order to construct a world

outside the bounds of reality."

It is not easy to follow Dr. Montessori's argument, indeed, it is probable that to offer a coherent argument was not part of her intention in the article on "The Imagination in Childhood," which appeared in the last issue of the "Educational Supplement." I gather with pleasure that she repudiates the "materialistic" notion that "the life of the individual reproduces the life of the species," and, therefore, the child is a little savage. Also it is good to know that the Dottoressa has considered our Lord's estimate as to the exalted estate of children, and she has probably noted the three prohibitions which should guide our attempts to educate, "offend not," "despise not," "hinder not" (i.e., "suffer") the children. In a word, the "don't" which is our favourite instrument in governing children—because we behave as the greater to the lesser—is imposed upon ourselves, we as the lesser being required to "become as little chlidren." [sic]

Now, is not the dominance of imagination in children precisely one of the points on which we must be "converted"? We too, have imagination, "in general, the power or process of producing mental pictures or ideas ("Encyclopædia Britannica"), but our imagination is in abeyance; we seldom give ourselves the trouble to produce mental pictures or ideas; and perhaps, if we may presume to guess darkly, one of the Divine purposes in the war is to enable us to figure to ourselves how others suffer and think, feel, and act. We have been pursuing civilization in lieu of education, and the result is a curious stolidity out of which the war may rouse us, but at what a price! But we have the children always with us, and the war may teach us how to educate them; we may come to perceive that children are born persons; that all the elements of peculiar personality are latent in the child in arms; that the little person is a spiritual being in a fleshly vesture; the body must be sustained and comforted, and so must the spirit or mind or soul, whatever we may call that which is non-material.

Before he can speak the babe gathers ample food for his spiritual nurture; presently, "his whole vocation is endless imita-

tion," and he waits on us for whatever his life requires; he still lives in the realm where all things are possible, and to be brought up against our limitations too suddenly hurts him; then let him "Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross"; let him learn life through the transfiguring medium of the fairy tale. But how is the fairy tale better than the tale of Tom and Harry who had each a cake sent to him at school? Simply because in the fairy tale all things are possible and strange things come to pass. What if these things are not true? The children know perfectly the difference between the kingdom of make-believe and the arid realm of fact; when they confuse the two it is often because their diet of make-believe is so limited that they figure to themselves facts otherwise than as they are; they have met so and so, whom they have not met, who said thus and thus; in fact, they "tell lies!" but their fault is not so shocking as it looks, for necessity is laid upon them to get out of the confines of use and wont. Is it perhaps the element of infinity in children that makes the fairy-tale world necessary? However it is, we need not be alarmed, for these tales make for righteousness, for the punishment of the evil-doer and the praise of them that do well.

There are excellent mediocre people who do not exercise the process or possess the power of seeing those things which are invisible, but all our great men and women have found

this way to distinction; historians, poets, painters, explorers, politicians, conquerors—all alike have seen the things invisible. Even mathematicians, most exact of men, play like children at "Let us suppose"; as for proof, demonstration,—"There is a growing feeling that it is better to give results without proof rather than to offer proofs in which all the difficulties are glossed over, and which afterwards have to be abandoned as unsound."[2]

We make two prime mistakes; we place children in a category by themselves instead of regarding them as persons like the rest of us; and we parcel off the elements of personality into imagination and a dozen other components, when spirit and matter are all we need take account of. We know pretty well what to do with body; spirit, mind, is apt to be inarticulate, and we must fall back on the analogy of body as our most convenient guide. "Brother Body" demands a good deal: activity, rest, food, air—these things and more are necessary, and not the finest poem that ever was writ will feed a hungry child. Mind has just such claims, and no external activity, be it making a pattern,

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dancing a minuet or making a "shell," brings mind its due and proper aliment. The food of mind, a daily bread as necessary as that of body, is precisely those "mental pictures or ideas" which imagination produces; and for this reason, children must have the mind-stuff which they can transmute into such pictures or ideas; nothing external serves the purpose. I am not bold enough to say with Mr. Chesterton, "Hans Anderson or Hell," but I do venture to say that the mind which does not feed on poetry, history, fiction, travel, all the treasures that are bound up in books, on pictures, on the beauty of a sunset or a flower, such a mind may be acute and alert, but it does not dwell in heavenly places.

It seems to me that Dr. Montessori indicates an important truth when she associates, if only to scorn the association, imagination with religion; (I should not myself speak of "cultivating the imagination" but of feeding a spiritual hunger); that she does so under protest is comprehensible to us whose children are not nourished on fond fables vainly imagined, the legendary lives of the Saints. But we do not abstain from bread because it is sometimes adulterated, but insist on the standard loaf. In like manner we nourish our children on "the sincere milk of the Word," and they delight in their sustenance; the village school child who tells how "the heavens opened and out popped an angel" had used that power to produce mental pictures which we call imagination or genius or original thought; and without such exercise of the power we possess, no religion, true or false, can exist. We must be able to see those things which are invisible, or how can we lift up our eyes to God? Imagination is, like faith, the evidence of things not seen; indeed, is not faith the supreme effort of imagination wherein she stretches her wings, compels her powers to produce mental pictures, or ideas, of the things eternal? Would we describe the aim of our Lord when He "taught daily"—we ask, was it not to teach men the reality of things unseen, the unreality of the things they laboured for? To this end He used every munition by which the case-hardened imagination of man is successfully attacked, symbol, tale, legend, such consummate poems as that beginning, "Consider the lilies of the field." Mere circumstantial or accidental truth did not come into the question; a tale of the imagination served to hold the essential truth, and we do not stop to inquire whether a certain man did or did not go down to Jericho.

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When the writer of the article in question tells us that "an apostle … has recourse to the

feelings and not to the imagination," we must pause to consider; if we confine "feelings" categorically to pleasure and pain, our hearts echo St. Francis Xavier's words, "Not for the sake of gaining Heaven or of escaping hell," not for any motive of self-interest are we drawn to God. But there is a popular and not inexact use of the word; "Ah! who shall teach us how to *feel*?" is the burden of Matthew Arnold's searching lament for Wordsworth; now, feeling in this sense arises only from that process whereby a mental picture is produced from the imagination which *sees into* life and finds deep meaning in its passing shows.

In a word, it is not a question of neglecting or fostering "the imagination," but of due education, a liberal education for every child of every class, whereby his mind shall be nourished year by year on such food for the imagination as is convenient for his age; thus illusions and superstitions shall fall and lie like last year's leaves; but only illusions; never shall he part with any form of words beautiful and complete enough to embody a living truth. Words are elusive; it is possible that Dr. Montessori and I mean the same thing, but even so, I think it is important that we should aim at expressing such truth as we know with approximate exactness in view of that "necessary revolution" which some of us see already in progress.

I am, Sir, truly yours,

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[1] Reprinted from *The Times Educational Supplement* of December 7th, 1915.

[2] Preface to "A School Algebra," by H. S. Hall.