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Box 09, Folder 13 - "Montessorism? Enthusiasm and Criticism" +"Montessori: An Appreciation" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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MONTESSORIISM ? ENTHUSIASM AND CRITICISM

Sir ,
The saying attributed to the mythical Irishman - that
" everyone has a right to his own opinion , especially to
the opinion that no one else has a right to his " certainly
does not apply in the sphere of literary criticism . As Cole-
ridge pointed out , years ago , the critic is perfectly free to
express any opinion he likes : it is only when the expression
of that opinion may give rise to a wrong impression as to
facts that a reply to it is justified . In the
issue of your magazine you printed a review of my book Maria
Montessori - Her Life and Work to which I beg the favour of
being allowed to reply , though I shall do so - if I may -
largely in the words of other reviewers .

Martha Vidor , your reviewer , objects that the book
" is written in superlatives , eulogising to a degree that no
amount of devotion and sincere admiration on the part of the
author can justify " . On this point M.V.C. Jeffreys ,
Professor of Education in the Birmingham University , writes
(in the Birmingham Post) :

If Mr Standing 's study has not the cold object-
ivity of the uncommitted (for he was an enthusiastic
disciple or over thirty years) his interpretation
has the greater virtue of deep understanding from
within , and his critical judgement is always lucid .
He is especially interesting - and scrupul-
ously fair - in his comparison of Montessori and
Freud

We readily concede that Montessori's followers do not
belong to the nil admirari brigade , and never did . On the

The White House ,
Woodland Way ,
Kingsford ,
Surrey
England
All Saints ' 58

Dear Reverend Father Sheerin ,

Your letter arrived the very day after I sent mine
off : many thanks for the same .

I am not surprised that you found the article I
sent too long . I am not quite sure what you mean by the
scope of your policy . If you can spare an exemplar of
your journal (not necessarily a current one) I should be
very pleased to see it - and the nature of your articles.

As to the manuscript I should be grateful if you
would return it to me at the above address .

With best wishes

Yours sincerely ,

contrary they are in full agreement with Emerson when he said " Nothing can be achieved without enthusiasm : the way of life is wonderful , it is by abandonment " .

Another reviewer - in your contemporary The New Era gives the reason for this state of things . In his opening paragraphs he (Mr Claude Claremont) writes :

The difficulty of writing soberly about Montessori and her work is that it is only possible to a person who has not understood it . Directly the barest gleams of truth begin to penetrate all the world looks different . students and lecturers alike pass into a state of trance for which enthusiasm is hardly the word and religious fervour would be more appropriate . It becomes, in short , a dream of salvation , this time through a transformed mankind rather than through a transformed system of laws or a fresh religious message .

Perplexing though this be to non-sharers of this vision , one must admit that solid progress in any new field always depends upon something of the kind happening to some people : and in the case of this book little of it would have been written , perhaps none , without the fervour of this vision , nor would it be so readable , so full of enchantment as it is , luring the reader on as a sparkling rill of water may lure the rambler .

On this same point the Principal of a large Catholic Training College - herself formerly a brilliant Montessori Directress - writes as follows (in Blackfriars)

All Montessorians are accused of exaggerated enthusiasms for the method and Mr Standing is no exception to the rule . But what those who look upon the Montessori Method from the outside cannot understand is the feelings of teachers who live and work fully according to Dr. Montessori's principles , when they see the amazing results that the system gives - results which Dr. Ballard , H.M.I. , years ago called " the Miracle of Montessori

The word " enthusiasm " tends to have a somewhat different overtone amongst Catholics (witness the title of Mgr Knox's great work) Yet enthusiasm itself is not necessarily objectionable : it becomes nauseating when it wallows in

sentimentality divorced from clear thinking . This is the state of things your reviewer suggests because she says the book " gives no coherent picture of the development of her (Montessorir's) work " - whereas The Times says :

They (the chapters of the book) are a coherent study of Montessori doctrine in the simple English of fire-side conversationHe (the author) has sorted out a mass of unpublished materials and given a massive authoritative exposition .

Further Miss Vidor complains that " the author makes no serious attempt to define her (Montessori's) place in education , or even in the more limited field of infant education " . This is a surprising statement in view of the fact that three whole chapters - some 50 pages - are devoted to a comparison between the ideas and methods of Montessori and Froebel her greatest predecessor in the sphere of infant education . In addition to this , in other parts of the book , considerable space is devoted to the way in which the development of Montessori's ideas was influenced by that other equally important - though less known - stream of educational research into which flowed , as tributaries , the great labours of Pereira , Itard and Sequin .

Towards the end of her review Miss Vidor refers to " recent developments in infant education and in the psychology of early childhood which " cannot but make us critical of some aspects of her methods " .As however she does not make even the briefest reference in passing to what they are it is not possible to assess the justice of her remark .

Meanwhile , in conclusion , we should like to ask your reviewer if she could direct us to any school -- where the under-fives are more happily engaged in exploring the sensorial qualities of the world around them ; where , at the same time their many and various activities render them more precise and disciplined in their spontaneous movements (so that even the tiniest is able , as a matter of course, to help himself to his own lunch from the various dishes on the - very low - canteen table) ; where, during this same epoch , 3- 5yrs , these children also spontaneously acquire the elements of writing , reading and number , without any formal or collective lessons , because these skills and this knowledge are acquired for their own sake and not as " tool " subjects ; a school where these same children when they pass on to the next group - six and onwards - will work continuously and spontaneously and individually (except when they prefer working with a friend) all the morning at such subjects as arithmetic , geometry , reading , history , composition , religion , nature- study ; a school where so much ~~of~~ freedom is combined with so much discipline and the social behaviour of the children among themselves and towards adults is more natural and harmonious ; a school in which even half as much care, time , and research has been lavished in the creation of a specially "Prepared Environment " - an environment in which in each subject each child finds waiting for him a long and carefully graded series of individual occupations which will enable him to progress along it individually at his own pace :

a school in which - pace the Froebellians - it is work not play , reality not make-believe , which absorbs the attention of the children ; and- finally - a school where over every thing broods that atmosphere of deep serenity and joy which id the God-given sign that faculties are being used in the way God meant them to be and the unmistakable index that the process of self-creation is going on smoothly in accordance with the inner physio-psychological laws of development --- if Miss Vidor can show us a school where all these things are going on together without the application of those Montessori principles described at length in the book under discussion - then I , for one , would be as pleased as I would be surprised and would make every effort to visit it at the earliest opportunity .

.....

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Miss Vidor further complains that " the author makes no serious attempt to define (Montessori's) place in education , or even in the more limited field of infant education " . This is a surprising statement in view of the fact that three chapters of the book - some 50 pages - are devoted to a comparison between the ideas and methods of Montessori and Froebel - her greatest predecessor in the sphere of infant education . In addition to this on other parts of the book considerable space is devoted to the way in which the development of Montessori's ideas were influenced by that other equally important - though less known - stream of educational research and practice into which flowed , as tributaries , the researches of Pereira , Itard and Seguin .

Towards the end of her review Miss Vidor refers " recent developments in infant education and in the psychology of early childhood " which " cannot but make us critical of some aspects of her methods " . But as she does not vouchsafe in passing to make even the briefest reference to what they are it is not possible to assess the justice of her remark .

Meanwhile , in conclusion , we should like to ask you reviewer if she could direct us to any school - where the under-fives are more happily engaged in exploring the sensorial qualities of the world around them ; where , at the same time their many and various activities render them more precise and disciplined in their spontaneous movements and behaviour - so that even the tiniest is able , as a matter of course , to help himself to his own lunch from ~~xxx~~ the various dishes on the (very low) canteen table ; where , during this same epoch , $3\frac{1}{2}$ - 5 yrs , these children spontaneously acquire the elements of reading and writing and number , without any " formal or collective " lessons because these skills and knowledge are acquired for their own sakes and not as " tool " subjects ; - children who , when they pass on to the next group, six and onwards , will work continuously and spontaneously and individually (except when they prefer to work with a friend) at such subjects as arithmetic , geometry , history , grammar , composition , religion , nature-study : in a school where so much freedom is accompanied by so much discipline : where the social behaviour of the children amongst themselves and towards adults is as natural and ^{helpful} ~~xxxxxxxx~~ harmonious ; a school in which even half as much care, time and thought has been lavished on the creation of a specially Prepared Environment - an environment in which each child finds waiting for him in each subject a long and carefully graded series of individual occupations which enable him to progress along it individually at his own pace

a school in which - pace the Froebeliens - it is work ,not play , reality not make belief which absorbs the attention of the children ;; and finally a school whereover everything reigns that atmosphere of deep serenity and joy which is the God@given sign that our faculties are being used in the way that they were meant to be and the unmistakable index that the mysterious process of self- creation is going on smoothly according to the inner laws of development --- if Muss Vidor - or in fact anyone else - can show us a school where all these things are going on together without the application of those Montessori principles described at length in the book under discussion - then I , for one , would be as pleased as I would be surprised and would make every effort to visit it at the earliest opportunity .

MARIA MONTESSORI—AN APPRECIATION

THE century in which we live has sometimes been called 'The Century of the Child'; and certain it is there has never been another epoch in which there have arisen so many movements centred in the child and its welfare. No one has better represented this movement than the great Italian educationalist—Dr Maria Montessori—whose death was announced last month.

Many others have loved children, worked for them, and with them; but no one—since Our Lord spoke those startling words of appreciation of children to His generation—no one has so completely understood the soul of the child in its depth and greatness, in its immense potentialities, and in the mysterious laws of its development.

What Wordsworth said of the child—'Oh thou whose exterior semblance does belie thy soul's immensity'—was the foundation of her work. It was the child himself, his soul, his person, which she cared about, not just 'Education' in the narrow sense of the word. Because children are living, immortal souls they are entitled to as much reverence and respect—as persons—as adults; even more since they are nearer to the streaming waters of Baptism. In fact, Montessori's whole life's work might be summed up as a defence of him whom she used to call *Il cittadino dimenticato* ('The Forgotten Citizen') and for the establishment of his rights.

Alone amongst the long line of great European educators—Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Herbart, etc.—she maintained that the one really essential preparation for a would-be teacher is a moral and spiritual one. No one, she said, is fit to direct the child's development who has not striven to purge herself of those two sins, to which teachers are most prone,—Pride and Anger.

Most people think of Dr Montessori as the

founder of the educational method which bears her name, but her real significance lies deeper. She will go down in history as one who discovered and revealed to the world qualities in childhood different from and higher than those usually attributed to children. By giving freedom (in a biological sense) to children in a specially prepared environment, rich in motives of activities, she was able to show to an astonished world children of 4½-5½ years who learned to read and write spontaneously; who chose to work rather than play or eat sweets; who loved order and silence; who displayed long-sustained and *quite* spontaneous intellectual concentration; who developed a real social life in which mutual helpfulness took the place of competition; who, though able to carry on their life with astonishing independence of adult help, were nevertheless extraordinarily docile and obedient, and finally children in whom liberty, far from producing chaos, resulted in a hitherto unknown collective discipline.

Only amongst Christians can Dr Montessori's system be appreciated to the full, and only amongst Catholics to the fullest, and this—not only because she herself was a Catholic and wrote books on the teaching of the Catholic Faith—but because there exists a striking natural affinity between the psychology underlying her method and what one might call the psychological method of the Catholic Church.

Dr Montessori was *par excellence* the great interpreter of the child: and though she herself has passed on from the scene of her labours her work will still go on. Indeed, it will last as long as children are born into this world to grow up in it with loving hearts, eager searching minds, and eyes wide open with wonder.

E. MORTIMER STANDING

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