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by Maria Montessori

Followers of Maria Montessori become accustomed to the oft-repeated stories that drive home a point, but here is a new treasure. This lecture tells of an experiment that Montessori began with 12- to 14-year-old children and then with 10-year-olds. When the poetry of Dante was introduced to these students, they became passionate and grew to love the Divine Comedy. Montessori showed the students that the verses were written in threes and that each line of poetry contained eleven syllables. This linguistic understanding led to analysis and exploration using dictation, circles to mark the syllables, and ultimately to the memorization of entire cantos and performances. In this lecture, Montessori inspires us to experiment, to reach for the best, and to challenge students. The Dante experiment embraced philosophy, history, theology, and poetry and deeply touched the emotions of the children.

I should like tonight to describe to you an experiment in the literary field carried out with children of a fairly advanced age. The children were 12, 13, and 14 years of age. As the experiment succeeded so well with these older children, it was tried along similar lines with younger children, children of 10.

The study was that of the poem of Italy's greatest, our world famous poet—Dante, in which he relates his journey through the regions of the dead—Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. This poem is generally considered as far beyond young children. Generally, we try to give children of a tender age the poetry of writers of little poetic value, as if bad poetry were more intelligible and explainable to them

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than sublime poetry. This poem of Dante is full of philosophy, full of historical records, but there is also a spirit in it which belongs to the poet's own spirit and which has nothing to do with the historical records nor the theological side of it. We may say that the poet's spirit is a synthesis which is hidden in all the cantos of the poem. How are we to draw forth this soul of genius-the man? In fact, these children never referred to the poem as the "Divine Comedy", but simply called it "Dante". These children loved the poet, the writer of the Divine Comedy, and in the end they spoke of him with an intensity of emotion which perhaps has never been felt by adults studying this poem.

Adults always consider a literary work from the point of view of the critic, so that we have here two quite different ways of considering the poem. The adult from the point of view of pure reason and the child with a heart which seeks out the meaning which inspires the poem.

The grown-up student does not generally occupy himself with the author as a man, and it is not generally considered that the author is deserving of gratitude and love as being a benefactor of humanity. Adults always consider a literary work from the point of view of the critic, so that we have here two quite different ways of considering the poem. The adult from the point of view of pure reason and the child with a heart which seeks out the meaning which inspires the poem.

This matter of the feeling of emotion on the part of the child has great importance for us who are occupied with education. The way in which we have presented Dante is perhaps quite different from any other way in which he has been presented to them. We present him to them in an analysis which touches the very depths of the child's soul. But instead of giving you many descriptions I will tell you just what was done.

You know that in a real experiment all the details are not foreseen and the experimenter himself may receive a surprise from his experiment. He begins but he does not know where he will end, especially in a matter like this where we enter into a field which is entirely unexplored. I tried to interest a child in a certain canto of

Dante, a very dramatic canto on the Inferno where a person has been condemned to die of hunger, together with his children, and Dante describes his sufferings as he is condemned to Inferno. I told the story in just a few words and read some of the lines of poetry, and the next day other children arrived who had been told something about it and who wanted to hear the story firsthand.

I repeated my few words and I began to see that these children had an extraordinary comprehension of what I was saying. This was the initiation, the first explosion of the matter. The whole contents and the words themselves interested the children. I did not myself know how far this interest went, but certainly a surprising emotion had been aroused in these children, so much so, that we felt the need of shutting ourselves up in a separate and quiet room, and I began to dictate. (Demonstration by four students sitting at a table with pencil and paper before them.) You must imagine that we have withdrawn into this quiet room, and you can imagine in what still quietude of recollection I began to dictate to them. (Dictates several lines from Dante in an even emotionless voice.) Thus it was that I dictated, and mark well, without putting any enthusiasm into it, so as not to put any of my personality into it, without paying any attention to the lines of poetry, just as if it were a piece of prose, that is, without any particular tension. Merely being careful to pronounce every word with care and attention, one after the other. This was a matter of letting sink in word by word what was desired by the listeners. It took a long time, and was done in a spirit of tranquillity, meditation, and in a voice that was only just heard and without any personality of the speaker in it.

Then the book began to interest us and we came to see that the verses are written in threes, and I then told them that each line of poetry contained 11 syllables, and in fact the whole poem is written in this meter, which was Dante's and is famous, and known as hendecasyllabic. This called forth indescribable enthusiasm among the children. How was it possible, they asked, to write a whole poem in which every line should contain only 11 syllables, and so great was their admiration that they began to buy for themselves portraits of Dante and little busts of the poet, so that they might have before them the object of their admiration.

Here I should like to illustrate to you the harmony of the verses (demonstration with chart) with the verbs at the end. See how harmoniously they are placed, not as in the 11 syllables of the verse, but a harmony in the line. (Reads)

This is a tercet of Dante, and represents a study carried out by fixing the attention on the author rather than the contents of the poem, focusing on the spirit of the man who wrote the poem. You can see that there are 11 syllables here. (Holds up chart with 11 little blue circles in shiny paper stuck on.) To find the symbols was a new piece of work. The sign in geometry which has its part in rhythm is the circle. I repeat the verse. We must hunt out the 11 syllables by ear and pay attention to the rhythm. (Demonstrates reading out verse and hitting a blue circle with a small hammer at each syllable.) Here we have an interesting exercise. Each child takes a chart and identifies the syllables. First, the poem is dictated and written down as prose, and then each child takes his chart and finds out for himself the verses, separating them into verses according to the 11 syllables in a line. This is a kind of problem. Now see what lies in this patient exercise. The verse of Dante is reproduced by the child himself. He receives, we might say, a piece of prose and he puts this prose into verse as Dante himself might have done. You see this manner of identifying oneself with the poet. These beautiful words and these geometrical figures are of a beauty one learns to love. One makes the whole of this live again in one's own being.

These children, while walking out of doors recited lines from Dante. The words had impressed themselves upon their minds; they had not learnt them by heart. Certain pieces of Dante remained within the children and when they were far away from the scene of their studies, these verses recurred to their minds and they uttered them aloud.

The children, in fact, expressed themselves in a strange manner in these studies which were continued and multiplied. They said, 'Let us do Dante' and this "doing" Dante became an exercise of which they never wearied. When the children in this separate room were so carried away with enthusiasm that I myself took on some of the enthusiasm, and when we happened to look at the clock we

discovered that we had been there 2 ½ or 3 ½ hours. And every day the children said 'Let us do Dante.'

Then another singular phenomenon occurred. These children, while walking out of doors recited lines from Dante. The words had impressed themselves upon their minds; they had not learnt them by heart. Certain pieces of Dante remained within the children and when they were far away from the scene of their studies, these verses recurred to their minds and they uttered them aloud. They did this without any reason, merely that they identified themselves with the poet and the words came forth naturally; this made a great impression upon me, as it did upon others, because these lines of Dante are of a profundity of meaning unparalleled. This shows us how spontaneously things impress themselves on memory. (Demonstration by four students sitting at table, each in turn stands up and recites a few lines from Dante.)

Little by little longer sentences were memorized and my dictation no longer sufficed them. The children thought that the whole of this poem must be most beautiful and they asked me to explain it all and wanted to read it all. They said, 'We wish to know it by heart from the beginning to the end.'

I thought to make a present to the children which would please them. I possessed a number of copies of Dante and I said that I would give them the copy that they preferred, and the answer was, 'No not these, we want pocket editions which we can carry always with us.' Then I sent for some small copies, and I thought of giving a copy to each and writing the name of the child in the copy, but as I am of a practical mind and prudent, I abstained from so doing. Later I saw a child examining the book on the outside and all over, and I asked, 'What are you looking at on the outside of the book?' and the child said, 'I wanted to see if there was any difference in this copy which is mine and the copies of the other children, because I like very much to have a copy, but I would not like to spoil it by having my own name written on it.' And when they had their books, these children began to copy out whole cantos and to memorize them, and they chose the best ink that they could get and gilded nibs and they ornamented the beginnings of the cantos with their own designs, and they found that they were capable of reciting numbers and numbers

of these verses and finally whole cantos of Dante. It is not an easy matter to copy from memory whole cantos of Dante.

Then the children thought out for themselves something which we had not thought of, which we even avoid, but which is really a help to the memory, and that is to have a prompter. So that one child recites and another follows in the book and is ready to prompt. It was done very seriously and there had to be a certain sympathy between the reciter and prompter. Each reciter chose his own prompter, and it was a great piece of work for the prompter because he had to read carefully every word so as not to miss anything, and in this way they came to know two or three cantos entirely. Then I suggested that they should distribute the cantos between themselves and each should recite one canto, but each of the children wanted to recite all the cantos, and when they had finished their recitation, they began all over again. They passed three and four hours together in this way, and there were people in my house who heard them and when they came again a month later they found the children still reciting the cantos and never getting weary of them. I thought of giving them some help in this memorizing, to carry out a work of reconstruction, returning to the old method of the cards, and I wrote out on separate cards all the words contained in 2 or 3 tercets which were well-known to the children but which they did not know by heart, and with these they reconstructed the verse again. They covered the floor with these cards and sometimes they had to go through a great mental labour to do it, having to remember the verses that they had read, and it was the sense which helped to put in place the words and the fact of having to find the 11 syllables also helped. (This was demonstrated by the four students who put out the cards as they thought were the right order and were finding the correct number of syllables in each line by tapping them out on the charts with 11 blue circles.)

I can hardly tell you how many packets of these cards we made. Very often the children themselves wrote the words on the cards, copying tercets which they did not know, and had the pleasure afterwards of putting them together. You see that it was not merely memory that was concerned but looking for a word order that made sense. There were boxes full of cards and they thought of having every possible colour and made designs upon them to

distinguish them. It is interesting to see the same phenomenon in children of all ages, something similar had been observed when little children of 4 years of age exploded into writing. (Chart held up containing numbers, underneath words, and underneath the words, musical notations.)

Here I present to you an exercise which was the beginning of a very great activity. This is really a study of metrics. We know that there have to be 11 syllables in the verses of Dante. We begin by dividing syllables according to grammar; the syllable generally consists of a vowel or diphthong preceded by a consonant. (Reads line on the chart.) Here we have 14 syllables instead of 11. How are we to get 11? The syllable in the verse is a single sound; it is not as we have said, merely a vowel with the consonant before it. It is a single sound; a sound which is part of the rhythm, and we can reconstruct, with the help of this chart (the one with the 11 blue circles). Reading in this way by ear the sounds are 11. Although



Left, Maria Montessori; right, profile portrait of Dante, by Sandro Botticelli, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante_Alighieri

we have 14 syllables, there are 3 syllables which must somehow be drawn in to make 11 syllables only. Doing this by ear we run here two vowels into one sound. Here again it is obvious that without straining the laws of versification, we have to combine together syllables belonging to the same word or the different words. Here we have an article and the first syllable of the following word all joined together and here finally a vowel followed by which melt one into the other. This is certainly most interesting and in this way one gets to the laws of metrics, or at least one gets sufficiently interested to study the laws of versification.

The idea then arose to recite syllable by syllable, and notice what the intention was in so doing, that no single sound of the words of Dante should be lost. Each sound was emitted with energy. (Demonstration-reciting verses clearly and striking (chart with 11 circles) a circle with a little hammer at each vowel sound.) We know that the Gregorian Chant had its origin in popular peasant songs, giving certain rhythm to their song. (Further demonstration by 4 students reciting lines, syllable by syllable in a chant with accompaniment on the piano.)

All these exercises are, we may say, exercises of fine penetration in the minds of the children, and some people have said that it was a matter of really reconstructing for themselves and living in the poem, and a love for the author had been called forth and an admiration for the work itself.

Suddenly the children, having already become possessed of so many of these cantos, had the desire of really living out the poetry. Dante tells in the poem about the souls he meets and talks with, and the children said, 'Let us each take a part, one will be Dante, another Virgil and another will be the soul which they meet and talk with.' And they wished to dress for the parts and for example the one who represented the soul dressed himself in a sheet, and when they had to climb a mountain, they climbed onto a chair, and as Dante and Virgil had laurel wreathes on their brows, they also made wreathes and wore them. At last they said, 'We must have a theatre, a Dante theatre.' But nobody had ever had this idea before. It was a marvellous thing that these children should have so much feeling in them that they acted like real artists. Here are some

pictures taken of the children in the scenes which they acted [not shown]. Now this Dante theatre carried on by the children was an established thing and people were amazed to see the expression shown by the children, which you can see in the photographs. In these days when the Dramatic Art is on the decline, it seemed to people that this might be the source of a new renaissance in the theatre. It would be the children who would give rise to this renaissance of artistic life in a new and better way. A strange thing is this that some of these children were extremely shy in the school but the admiration for Dante drove out their timidity. They began to act in the presence of hundreds of people and in Amsterdam a stage was arranged in a very large concert hall and they acted before a public of 1500 people. The artist was really born, and an artist who is born in this way must be said to really feel the poem that he acts.

