# RAISING A CHILD ACCORDING TO WORDSWORTH AND CHARLOTTE MASON

*by Louis Markos, Houston Baptist University*

Due to a torrential rainstorm that ripped its way through Houston, Texas, in the middle of April, 2016, my university shut its doors for two consecutive days. Not wanting to waste away my enforced leisure time, I took up two books, written thirty years apart, that had been gathering dust on my shelf. They had been gifted to me by a friend who shares my love for classical Christian education, whether conducted in school or at home; both books celebrate and elucidate the writings and educational theories of Charlotte Mason: *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay (1984) and *Consider This: Charlotte Mason and the Classical Tradition* by Karen Glass (2014).

The effect on my psyche was electric, rivaling the lightning bolts that flashed off and on outside my study window. How desperately our age needs to recover Mason's timeless insights into how to shape young people into good and virtuous citizens. How transformed our schools would be if they factored in her classically inspired view of the proper ends and methods of education. How wonderful it would be to see children thus taught wake up from the cold slumber of utilitarianism and the common core.

Working from a solid, non-denominational Christian worldview, Mason (1842–1923) rests all of her theories on the foundational principle that children are born persons and that they are equally capable of good and evil. Our job as educators is to guide students into a love of learning that will help order their affections, ennoble their conduct, and mold their characters.

Since children's minds, like their bodies, possess from birth all the tools they need to absorb and assimilate the nourishment they are given, the role of education should be to expose them to the right books and activities that they need to satisfy their mental hunger. Just as vitally, those books and activities must be offered up in their wholeness and totality, rather than in fragmented tidbits that do not nourish or satisfy.

At the core of Mason's educational theories lies the distinction between synthesis and analysis. Whereas our scientific, technological age puts all its focus on analysis, Mason's classical vision seeks after a more holistic grasp of God, man, and the natural world. Books are the prime vehicle for achieving that synthesis, but only if they are cherished, enjoyed, taken in as close friends. Rather than use the book merely as a tool for teaching the rules of grammar and syntax or for improving vocabulary, the

***Louis Markos,*** *professor in English and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; he is the author of* From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics, The Eye of the Beholder: How to See the World like a Romantic Poet*, and* On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis. *These, and his children's novel,* The Dreaming Stone *(in which his kids become part of Greek mythology and learn that Christ is the myth made fact), are available on his Amazon author page.*

teacher must invite the student to feast on the book, to live through its characters, to participate in its struggles and victories.

How does one foster such an atmosphere? By making sure that student learning and discovery are vigorous and alive, part of that Great Conversation that links us back to the Greeks and the Romans, the early church and the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the birth of Romanticism.

I hope this brief overview of Mason's pedagogical vision will convey the sense of hope and excitement that I felt as I read Macaulay and Glass's assessments of Mason's theories. Here, at last, were real answers to the problems of modern education.

According to the twelfth principle of Mason's Twenty Principles of Education (which list of principles is easily accessible at a number of different websites):

> "*Education is the Science of Relations*"; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon many living books, for we know that our business is not to teach him all about anything, but to help him to make valid as many as may be of—"Those first-born affinities / That fit our new existence to existing things."

Given that I wrote my dissertation on Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it only took me a few seconds to realize that Mason was quoting from the first book of Wordsworth's poetic autobiography.

I consciously raised my own children in a Wordsworthian manner. That is not to say they grew up in the countryside, as Wordsworth did in the lovely Lake District of England, but that I encouraged them to interact in a direct and spontaneous manner with the stories I read to them and the environment around them. I wanted them to know, not so much through study as through participation, how they fit into the world and how the world fit into them. "The world is full of magic," I taught them, "—you just have to have eyes to see it and ears to hear it."

From an early age, I pushed my children to observe things closely, not so they could be tested on the knowledge, but so that they could, simultaneously, enjoy them fully and store them up for the future. Though I knew I was honoring Wordsworth in doing this, I was unaware that I was also honoring Charlotte Mason.

*The Prelude*, an epic-length poem that traces the growth of Wordsworth's mind, heart, soul, and spirit, is too long and complex to be tackled in an essay. Thankfully, however, Wordsworth himself provided his readers with a much shorter, more condensed version of that growth in Book I of *The Excursion*. Through what purports to be a chronicle of the education-in-nature of a character he calls "the Wanderer," Wordsworth presents his own natural education.

I would like in what follows to take the reader through that chronicle, not only as a way of elucidating Mason's theories, but to provide a more general guide to teachers and parents of the subtle, intimate, mystical way in which the mind is knit together and becomes whole. Whether you are a public or private school teacher, a homeschooling parent, or, like me, a parent who supplemented his children's education through activities at home, I believe that you will find in Mason-Wordsworth a compelling vision of how children's minds develop and grow.

Let me begin by quoting a well-known passage from the opening of Act V of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.
> The lunatic, the lover and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.

One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

I quote this passage in full for the distinction it makes between apprehend and comprehend not only is key to Wordsworth's poetic education but overlaps, I would argue, with the distinction Mason makes between synthesis and analysis. Indeed not only is the distinction similar; both Mason and Wordsworth (and perhaps Shakespeare) insist that the former must precede the latter.

Unlike cold, rational comprehension, apprehension is passionate and unpredictable. Both the lunatic and the lover see things (devils, Helen's beauty) that cannot be contained in their respective receptacles (hell, brow of Egypt). Their seething brains do not stop to question or analyze the images that pass through their uncritical doors of perception. Likewise, the poet, as he glances wildly from heaven to earth, seeks to receive, not neat, compact, picturesque images, but airy nothings, things unknown to which he will later give a body, a form, and a name.

Through the power of apprehension ("seething brains"), the poet not only receives uncritically external stimulants that cannot be comprehended (contained) within rational confines; he allows himself to be penetrated and impregnated by forces and feelings without form or name. Through the power of comprehension ("shaping fantasies"), he then engenders and brings to fruition the implanted seed by, quite literally, bodying it forth into a unique, poetic shape. Thus, an apprehended feeling of unbounded, free-floating joy is comprehended into a single, concrete bringer of that joy. Or again, an intangible experience of fear is comprehended (given shape) by imaginatively transforming a bush into a bear and forcing this newly-created image to contain the emotional force of the apprehended fear.

This same distinction between apprehension and comprehension is worked out in detail in Wordsworth's account of the poetic education of the Wanderer:

While yet a child,
He had perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness; and deep feelings had impressed
So vividly great objects that they lay
Upon his mind like substances, whose presence
Perplexed the bodily sense. (134–139)

Like Shakespeare's apprehensive poet, the Wanderer is so penetrated by external forces and feelings that they are said to "lay upon his mind *like* substances." But, of course, they are only like substances, for though they have substance, they have no form. And, although the impression they make is vivid and lasting, their effect is to perplex the bodily sense that feels their weight yet comprehends no accompanying mass.

It is exactly this experience that Mason desires for her pupils, an experience that can be expressed in numerous words, all of which combine the physical, emotional, and spiritual, and all of which produce that all-important humility that lies at the root of education: astonishment, wonder, awe, terror, fear. The child, Mason and Wordsworth both insist, has the ability to take in such experiences, even if he cannot immediately

understand them. And it is right for parents and teachers to allow him to have that experience without incessantly demanding that it be broken down, analyzed, and categorized under scientific-sociological headings.

In the lines that follow Wordsworth describes in greater detail this process by which the external world impressed itself upon the boy's mind. He then adds, by way of summation, that "thus informed" by his intercourse with nature, the Wanderer

> . . . had small need of books; for many a tale
> Traditionary, round the mountains hung,
> And many a legend, peopling the dark woods,
> Nourished Imagination in her growth,
> And gave the Mind that apprehensive power,
> By which she is made quick to recognize
> The moral properties and scope of things. (162–169)

Like the free-floating, bodiless joy and fear that are apprehended by Shakespeare's poet, these natural tales and legends are not contained in books but inhabit an unbounded world of mountains and dark woods.

They lack a definite form or shape, and yet, it is by way of his intimate connection with these bodiless tales that the Wanderer's "Imagination" and his "apprehensive power" are nurtured. This apprehensive power is defined as that power which allows the boy to recognize "the moral properties and scope of things." Again, it is not the form but the scope, not the external features but the moral properties that are apprehended. Furthermore, the power is said to manifest itself in the form of a "quick" recognition, an adjective that emphasizes the suddenness of the experience and its ability to penetrate deeply into the perceiving mind.

Mason was a Christian, as are the majority of parents and teachers who have revived her methods, and she was committed to nurturing students in a living and active faith.

This same kind of spiritual formation is evident in the education of the Wanderer. Through a baptized poetic language that is at once ordinary and deeply mystical, Wordsworth conjures the actively passive process by which natural forces and feelings are received into the psyche of the child:

> . . . his spirit drank
> The spectacle: sensation, soul, and form,
> All melted into him; they swallowed up
> His animal being; in them did he live,
> And by them did he live; they were his life.
> In such access of mind, in such high hour
> Of visitation from the living God,
> Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
> No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request;
> Rapt into still communion that transcends
> The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
> His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
> That made him; it was blessedness and love! (206–218)

As before, the mere forms of prayer and praise cannot contain the force of what is apprehended. However, in this restatement of the Wanderer's apprehensive powers, Wordsworth factors in an additional element, a poetic metaphor that is also key to Mason.

I refer, of course, to the metaphor of eating and drinking. In an elemental communion rite the Wanderer both swallows the spectacle and is swallowed by it. The experience is unmediated and thoughtless—or, better, it transcends thought. The child is no more conscious of it than he is of taking in food and water. But the experience is real and lifechanging; it is also profoundly spiritual. It fills him with the kind of love and gratitude that parents and teachers often fail to instill in their charges by forcing them to write formal thank you cards without first teaching them what it *feels* like to be thankful.

Apart from that feeling, the child will never grow fully into a moral being who loves goodness, beauty,

and truth. Still, his education must not end with feeling. If the child (or poet) is formed by a process of apprehension, then there must follow a complementary process of comprehension by which the power he has absorbed is transferred into action/poetry. Thus it is that, after describing in full the apprehensive power of the Wanderer and the blessed intercourse with nature upon which it fed, Wordsworth proceeds to speak of a second power:

> But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith.
> All things, responsive to the writing, there
> Breathed immortality, revolving life,
> And greatness still revolving; infinite.
> There littleness was not; the least of things
> Seemed infinite; and there his spirit shaped
> Her prospects, nor did he believe,—he *saw*.
> What wonder if his being thus became
> Sublime and comprehensive! (226-234)

Here for the first time we find a power contained within a form ("the least of things seemed infinite"). No longer does the poet merely feel, he *sees*.

For the first time, the poet takes a fully active role in the process: "his spirit shaped her [nature's] prospects." Slowly, progressively, the Wanderer begins to fashion the writing to which nature responds by breathing into it immortality and infinity. His spirit begins to shape, his eye to see and, nurtured by this newfound power, his being becomes "comprehensive."

The parent or teacher who follows Mason's advice and puts off heavy going analytical thought until the child is older need not fear that he will raise a simpleton. To the contrary, the student who has had his apprehensive powers nurtured and strengthened, who has learned to see the world synthetically in all its direct, unmediated beauty and wonder, will blossom naturally into comprehension-analysis when the time is ripe.

Let us, therefore, as educators not put road blocks in the way of apprehension/synthesis. Let us stop comparing our children/students to others and insisting that they not "fall behind" in the three "R's." True education is not a race or a contest; it is a love affair.

"Train up a child in the way he should go," Proverbs 22:6 promises us, "and when he is old, he will not depart from it." If we will pay heed to Mason and Wordsworth, we will realize that the training of a child does not begin and end with rote memorization and lists of facts, but includes, if not demands, the instilling of wonder, love, gratitude, and humility for the abundant gifts that lie about us.

The world is full of magic . . . even, so it seems, in the midst of a rainstorm!