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Infantilism – Untapped Potential in the Perspective of Becoming an Adult.

Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – “Experience of Infantilism”

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

infantilization, adult, child, Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The aim of the article is not to discuss the perspective of indolence, but to focus on using childhood potential in building adulthood. For this purpose, the author invokes the philosophical tale *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which perfectly illustrates the relationship between an adult and a child, a symbolic relationship between being a child and being and becoming an adult. Following this logic, the use of *The Little Prince* is the key to understand the category of infantilization, thereby reflecting the way and content of value applicability. The author begins her considerations with the attempt to define infantilization, entering the representations by G. Bachelard, R. Barber and C.G. Jung into the discourse. The next step is referring to the category of the novel as “the laboratory of the human soul” (Jaworska-Witkowska), and thus as rewarding material for analysis which is crucial for the pedagogical discourse. The second part of the text includes several ways of interpreting *The Little Prince*, with pedagogical reflection in the background.

Adulthood as the beginning of death

Hey- Katarzyna Nosowska

All grown-ups were once children—although few of them remember it

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

A Few Words of Introduction. Infantilization – A Penetrating Category of Everyday Life

Infantilization is characterized by dichotomy, which consists in the fact that we can consider this phenomenon from the point of view of dysfunction, disorder (clinical pathology), or we can outline its positive overtones (Chrobak, Wądolny-Tatar 2016). Infantilization is identified with “stalling of human mental and often physical development on the level of a child” (Chrabąszcz 2016: 303). This activates a spectrum of contradictions: Does the possession of traits *strictly* connected with infantilization constitute an important and indispensable element of being an adult? Does the elimination of the traits (characteristic of infantilism) guarantee success in the adult world? Infantilism is also connected with the “lack of expected maturity” (Chrabąszcz 2016: 304) and with an “unnatural break in development” (Chrabąszcz 2016: 304). Moreover:

“Infantilization is supposed to indicate kindness, gentleness or even elegance (usually rather tasteless). Its major role in the way we express ourselves can be seen in the remarkable amount of diminutive forms, which have appeared in the last decades in areas where they were not used as a matter of frequency or rule (this appearance seldom took place in the language of politics and more frequently in public speech, which is connected with the sphere of privacy). Obituaries in the press are a particular domain of infantilization. The death of “mum” or “dad” used to be mentioned in obituary letters of condolences to children or very young people. Today this form is becoming nearly universal. Nowadays we express our condolences for the passing away of “mum” or “dad” to a rector or principal – arguably serious, mature and “established” people. The words “mother” and “father” virtually disappeared from the funeral context” (Głowiński 2018) (translator’s note: own translation).

In the text infantilization is understood as “an attitude of openness, enormous cognitive curiosity and the process of self-realization” (Chrabąszcz 2016: 306).

The term infantilism is also connected with the category of regression. Regression as a defense mechanism may have positive and negative consequences. On one hand,

the context of childhood reminiscence is connected with protecting oneself. On the other hand, when the individual assumes a narcissistic attitude:

narcissism becomes regression, a retreat from the dilemmas of the oedipal stage, and a focus on earlier stages of development – [...]. In this sense we can speak of defensive narcissism or of narcissistic defenses. A child does not reach the oedipal stage or retreats from it as a result of frustration, and focuses his or her drives on him/herself. Narcissistic fixation or regression results in the development of dominating narcissistic personality traits. At that point we are dealing with a narcissistic personality disorder” (Czernianin, Czernianin 2017: 23) (translator’s note: own translation).

Several Words on Benjamin R. Barber’s “*Ethos of Infantilization*”

Benjamin R. Barber writes that the term infantilization is “difficult and confrontational at the same time; that it is a distinct metaphor, which, on one hand, indicates the trivialization of commodity and the infatuation of consumers in the post-modern global economy which seems to produce more goods than people need, and, on the other hand, points to the fact that on the market, where there are never enough customers, children become the target of marketing campaigns” (Barber 2008: 8) (translator’s note: own translation). It is also “closely related to the requirements of consumer capitalism under the conditions of a global market economy” (Barber 2008: 10). The perspective suggested by Barber offers an interesting outlook on the category of infantilization, but it also ascribes to it a pejorative overtone by introducing the category of the “ethos of infantilization” (Barber 2008). Barber also indicates that the aim of “infantilization is to instill in adults the traits of children and to preserve these traits in children who are trying to become adults, when they are ‘given the power’ to consume. The criteria of childishness are naturally norms included in the essence of childhood itself, which is not so much a biological fact but a figment of people’s imagination, ‘invented’ for social, economic and political purposes” (Barber 2008: 130) (translator’s note: own translation).

C.G. Jung's *Phenomenology of the Child Archetype* as a Footnote to Infantilization

According to Jung, the child has an initiatory dimension perceived in the categories of transition and transformation. In the text devoted to the *Phenomenology of the Child Archetype* Jung indicates the child as “symbolic content” (1988: 256), which “rises towards independence” (1988: 256). These constellations of content described by Jung primarily focus on the reflection that the “child is endowed with superior powers and, despite all dangers, he or she will unexpectedly pull through. The “child” is born out of the womb of the unconscious, begotten out of the depths of human nature, or rather – out of living nature itself” (Jung 1988: 258). Although Jung’s reflections invoke a mythical context and thus a search for symbols uniting these perspectives, “in all myths concerning childhood we encounter a strange paradox: on one hand, “vulnerable” children are left at the mercy of very powerful enemies and are constantly at risk of destruction, and on the other hand – they have access to the powers that are beyond human measure (Jung, 1988: 258). That is why, children “are something that is modest, insignificant; they are ‘mere children’, but – at the same time – they are ‘divine’” (Jung 1988: 258).

“Experiencing Infantilism,” i. e. Another Perspective, This Time in Gaston Bachelard's Poetics of Imagination

In *The Poetics of Reverie* Gaston Bachelard indicates the strong connection between the past and the future of people’s existential experiences. The world of children can be full of happiness and joy, but it can also be a place where various negative events occur. That is why childhood is the “origin of the greatest landscapes” (Bachelard 1998: 188). At the same time, Bachelard underlines his care about “curing badly spent childhoods, [...] curing the puerile sufferings of indurate childhood which oppresses the psyche of so many adults (Bachelard 1998: 115). Our experience dominates and determines our actions in adulthood, specifying who we are and what we can become. As Marzena Karwowska points out, “thanks to ‘a dream towards childhood’, the Cogito of the Dreamer – Consciousness which Creates images, ‘experiences’ happiness, and the Dreamer (the basic unit in Bachelard’s anthropology) overcomes the sadness of passing away, evoked by the linear character of time and the *terror* of history” (2015: 17). Thus, demanding reflection is also above the category of dream, reminiscence and the phenomenon of childhood. Bachelard writes:

Memory is a field full of psychological ruin, a whatnot full of memories. Our whole childhood has to be reimagined. In reimagining it, we have the possibility of recovering it in the very life of our reverie [...]. The theses which I wish to defend [...] boil down to recognizing within the human soul the permanence of a nucleus of childhood [...] outside history, hidden from others [...], having a real existence only in its moments of illumination – which is to say in its moments of poetic existence. [...] Every child is an astonishing being, a being who realizes astonishment with being. We thus discover within ourselves an immobile childhood, a childhood without becoming, liberated from the gearwheels of the calendar [...]. Thus, taken in the perspective of its archetypal qualities, put back into the cosmos of great archetypes which are at the base of the human soul, childhood is more than a sum of our memories. To understand our attachment to the world, it is necessary to add childhood, our childhood, to each archetype. We cannot love water, fire or trees without putting a love into them, a friendship which goes back to our childhood. [...] Without childhood there is no real cosmicity. [...] Childhood has its own clear phenomenological meaning, as it originates from delight (Bachelard 1998: 115, 134, 146-147; Karwowska 2015: 17-18).

Being Like Phoenix – An Additional Word

Dying and rebirth. Death and resurrection. Being like Phoenix reborn from the ashes. This is an existential blessing. To discover in oneself a spark of childhood is to be born again, just like “[...] being perpetually reborn and passing away without forgetting.” The difficulty of remembering and the return to un-socialized consciousness” (Jaworska-Witkowska 2016: 124).

“Laboratory of Human Existence” (Jaworska-Witkowska) – The Potential of Stories in Pedagogical Discourse

Using the potential of literature is becoming an important lead to the discovery of existential traces of human experience. This is becoming an increasingly widespread strategy in pedagogy. Monika Jaworska-Witkowska writes that “pedagogy requires the consciousness of functioning as cultural practice, which requires meta-humanistic reflection and learning disciplinary divisions in a horizontal manner, in order to work out a higher level of specialization in education and in integration, to the benefit of the quality of humanity and its seating in culture” (Jaworska-Witkowska 2011: 204). Monika Jaworska-Witkowska calls this:

‘searching the humanities for pedagogy’. Realization of tasks requires the implementation of a strategy of critical and contemplative reading of texts belonging to the entire

cultural space, a strategy which includes a hermeneutic respect for the sense and meaning of the text, heuristic reading, a multitude of interpretations and the cognitive interest of pedagogy, which opens up to the canon of the humanities (integral and integrating cognition). This way pedagogy has a chance to implement T. Kotarbiński's concept of "higher order specialization" as a field of knowledge which "absorbs and generates," which "systematically organizes knowledge of all reality" in order not to "spoil pedagogical work by a narrow carrying out of the profession," open to a conflict of ideas, aporiae, dichotomies and cognitive ambivalence (Jaworska-Witkowska 2011: 204).

In the wake of Jaworska-Witkowska's train of thought we notice the intertwining of experience described in the books with everyday experience. This resulted in the idea of entering *The Little Prince* in the discourse on infantilism. The novel effectively presents the relationships between an adult and a child, the symbolic relationships between being a child and being and becoming an adult. It is a philosophical tale which, in accordance with Richard Rorty, is included in the repertoire of "wisdom of the tale" (Rorty 1993).

In the Eyes of *The Little Prince*. Several Paths to Read the *Little Prince* with a Pedagogical Reflection

The story of *The Little Prince* described by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry certainly refers to existential phenomena. It also touches upon the problem of initiation connected with the passage from childhood to adulthood, where the latter can sometimes be considered a "parody" of the former (Drewermann 1996), for in the eyes of the Little Prince: "grown-ups are very strange" (Saint-Exupéry 2018: 36), "Grown-ups are definitely quite extraordinary" (Saint-Exupéry 2018: 38), "Grown-ups are decidedly really, really weird" (Saint-Exupéry 2018: 39).

Thus:

It is a story which begins with showing what adults can destroy in a child before his or her life actually begins. The work, dedicated to an adult person, addresses a child, whom the adult used to be. It implores all the children in the world not to believe adults and retain their simplicity of heart; however, it does not show the opportunity that adults could have to reject their vile deeds and find a path to themselves, to their primal childishness; or a way in which the Little Prince could take over his secret kingdom on Earth. On the contrary, in the end the Little Prince goes back to his tiny planet out of his faithfulness to his rose, and the aviator goes back to adult life, undoubtedly feeling greater yearning and sadness than ever before, but without the Little Prince (Drewermann 1996).

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry leaves numerous signs, which can constitute an important educational factor – something similar to crucial, twofold moments in reaching

adulthood. Below, the author presents certain areas oscillating between infantilism and deconstruction in the fragments of *The Little Prince*, which constitute a proposition for an educational context. The author leaves many significant leads, which form an important construct in pedagogical thinking:

1) **The parody of adulthood (Drewermann 1996) as a gradual initiation into the category of obedience**

“Ah! Here is a subject”, exclaimed the king, when he saw the little prince coming. And the little prince asked himself:

“How could he recognize me when he had never seen me before?”. He did not know how the world is simplified for kings. To them, all men are subjects.

“Approach, so that I may see you better”, said the king, who felt consumingly proud of being at last a king over somebody.

The little prince looked everywhere to find a place to sit down; but the entire planet was crammed and obstructed by the king’s magnificent ermine robe. So he remained standing upright, and, since he was tired, he yawned.

“It is contrary to etiquette to yawn in the presence of a king”, the monarch said to him. “I forbid you to do so.”

“I can’t help it. I can’t stop myself”, replied the little prince, thoroughly embarrassed.

“I have come on a long journey, and I have had no sleep...”

“Ah, then,” the king said. “I order you to yawn. It is years since I have seen anyone yawning. Yawns, to me, are objects of curiosity. Come, now! Yawn again! It is an order.”

“That frightens me... I cannot, any more...”, murmured the little prince, now completely abashed.

“Hum! Hum!” replied the king. “Then I-- I order you sometimes to yawn and sometimes to...”

He sputtered a little, and seemed vexed. For what the king fundamentally insisted upon was that his authority should be respected. He tolerated no disobedience. He was an absolute monarch. But, because he was a very good man, he made his orders reasonable.

“If I ordered a general,” he would say, by way of example, “if I ordered a general to change himself into a sea bird, and if the general did not obey me, that would not be the fault of the general. It would be my fault.”

“May I sit down?” came now a timid inquiry from the little prince.

“I order you to do so,” the king answered him, and majestically gathered in a fold of his ermine mantle.

But the little prince was wondering... The planet was tiny. Over what could this king really rule?

“Sire,” he said to him, “I beg that you will excuse my asking you a question—”

“I order you to ask me a question,” the king hastened to assure him.

“Sire-- over what do you rule?”

“Over everything,” said the king, with magnificent simplicity.

“Over everything?”

The king made a gesture, which took in his planet, the other planets, and all the stars.

“Over all that?” asked the little prince.

“Over all that,” the king answered. For his rule was not only absolute: it was also universal.

“And the stars obey you?”

“Certainly they do,” the king said. “They obey instantly. I do not permit insubordination” (de Saint-Exupéry 2018: 36-41).

2) “Egocentric Foolery” (Drewermann 1996)

“Ah! Ah! I am about to receive a visit from an admirer!” he exclaimed from afar, when he first saw the Little Prince coming. For, to conceited men, all other men are admirers. “Good morning,” said the little prince. “That is a queer hat you are wearing.” “It is a hat for salutes,” the conceited man replied. “It is to raise in salute when people acclaim me. Unfortunately, nobody at all ever passes this way.” “Yes?” said the little prince, who did not understand what the conceited man was talking about (de Saint-Exupéry 2018: 21).

3) Cognitive distortion

I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them. But they answered: “Frighten? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?” My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. But since the grown-ups were not able to understand it, I made another drawing: I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. They always need to have things explained. My Drawing Number Two looked like this: The grown-ups advised me to leave aside the drawings of boa constrictors from the outside or the inside, and to interest myself instead in geography, history, calculation, and grammar. Thus, at the age of six, I abandoned a magnificent career as a painter. I had been discouraged by the failure of my first drawing and my second drawing. Grown-ups never understand anything on their own, and it is tiring for children to always have to give them explanations. So I had to choose another profession. I learned to fly planes. I flew all over the world. And geography, that’s right, served me well. I knew how to recognize, at first glance, China, or Arizona. It is useful if you have gone astray during the night” (de Saint-Exupéry 2018: 29-30).

4) The power of imagination

“That doesn’t matter. Draw me a sheep...”

But I had never drawn a sheep. So I drew for him one of the two pictures I had drawn so often. It was that of the boa constrictor from the outside. And I was astounded to hear the little fellow greet it with,

“No, no, no! I do not want an elephant inside a boa constrictor. A boa constrictor is a very dangerous creature, and an elephant is very cumbersome. Where I live, everything is very small. What I need is a sheep. Draw me a sheep.”

So then I made a drawing.

He looked at it carefully, then he said:

“No. This sheep is already very sickly. Make me another.”

So I made another drawing.

My friend smiled gently and indulgently.

“You see yourself,” he said, “that this is not a sheep. This is a ram. It has horns.”

So then I did my drawing over once more but it was rejected too, just like the others.

“This one is too old. I want a sheep that will live a long time.”

By this time my patience was exhausted, because I was in a hurry to start taking my engine apart. So I tossed off this drawing.

And I threw out an explanation with it. “This is only his box. The sheep you asked for is inside.” I was very surprised to see a light break over the face of my young judge: “That is exactly the way I wanted it! Do you think that this sheep will have to have a great deal of grass?”. “Why?”. “Because where I live everything is very small...”. “There will surely be enough grass for him,” I said. “It is a very small sheep that I have given you.” He bent his head over the drawing. “Not so small that—Look! He has gone to sleep...”. And that is how I made the acquaintance of the Little Prince” (de Saint-Exupéry: 4-5).

5) Erasing reality

“What are you doing there?”, he said to the tippler, whom he found settled down in silence before a collection of empty bottles and also a collection of full bottles.

“I am drinking,” replied the tippler, with a lugubrious air.

“Why are you drinking?”, demanded the Little Prince.

“So that I may forget,” replied the tippler. “Forget what?”, inquired the Little Prince, who already was sorry for him. “Forget that I am ashamed,” the tippler confessed, hanging his head.

“Ashamed of what?” insisted the Little Prince, who wanted to help him. “Ashamed of drinking!”, the tippler brought his speech to an end, and shut himself up in an impenetrable silence. And the Little Prince went away, puzzled.

“The grown-ups are certainly very, very odd,” he said to himself, as he continued on his journey” (de Saint-Exupéry: 21-22).

6) Conformist entanglement

“What a queer planet!”, he thought. “It is altogether dry, and altogether pointed, and altogether harsh and forbidding. And the people have no imagination. They repeat whatever one says to them” (de Saint-Exupéry: 32).

Becoming entangled in the whirl of the presented clues does not allow us to treat adulthood and childhood seriously. It creates a framework of disqualification and pejorative perception of adulthood. The infantilization potential may result in a completely new view of adulthood as discovering one’s potential based on self-irony, self-realization, with a simultaneous liberation from parody and kitsch connected with adulthood and escape into egocentric foolery. That is why Saint-Exupéry presents so many adults as confined in their own private worlds, “as symbols of ‘withdrawn,

alienated human ways of living: wielding power, vanity, drunkenness, cumulating wealth for its own sake, work for its own sake, empty office erudition.' We are presented with a very pessimistic vision of the adult world. Adults do not notice other people and care only about their own affairs. However, this does not allow them to feel happy. On the contrary, it makes it impossible" (Borowski 2014). Thus, it constitutes a form of demand for impulses for oneself, a demand to touch the chimaera of childhood, a demand for a specific plan of developmental visions, which are a remedy for the phobias of adulthood, helping one to open up to the capital within oneself.

The presented clues are also a way for the hero to open up to the initiation cycle, for each encounter the Little Prince has with adults has an initiatory dimension. It is a departure from the known and predictable world. The Little Prince prevails in each encounter in terms of cognitive issues, which allow him to tame the paradoxes of adulthood. The Little Prince notices and sees things which have never entered his mind. He gathers knowledge which he confronts with himself.

Instead of an Ending

The presented considerations oscillate between the categories of childhood and adulthood, and are thus inscribed in the eponymous problem of infantilization. Thus we are dealing with a significant area of existence. Infantilization can assume various forms and in doing so contribute to a completely different reconstruction of the world. The signs presented and described in the text are an important educational factor. Their presentation was meant to indicate pitfalls in adulthood which we are exposed to. Being conscious of these pitfalls and of being entangled in them may be an important factor in transforming and nurturing the child within.

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