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Destroying the Imagination of Your Child

JAMES STANLEY

Anthony Esolen, *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2010).

Assuming the persona, as it were, of his own evil twin, Anthony Esolen casts his recent book in an ironical frame reminiscent of C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. In place of the seasoned and slightly "affectionate" Uncle Screwtape—elder demon in the service of Their Father Below—we meet the in-some-ways-less-affable state school commissioner, or some such creature, who would like to propose his *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child*. These, he claims, are really only a kind of summary of the implications of our own thoughts and actions, part of the very fabric of the culture we have helped to create: "But we don't want that!" we might object; "Yes, dear reader, you do. Children make liars of us all. Almost everything we say about them is a lie. We believe exactly the opposite, and act accordingly" (xi). Here at last, then, is the inspector who will iron out for us that last wrinkle in our seamless, service economy: the essential element of spontaneity which makes us more than machines.

And yet here is a rare commissioner indeed, himself possessed of an uncharacteristic command of the great classical and Catholic tradition (perhaps he gleaned something from Esolen's earlier *Politically Incorrect Guide to Western Civilization*). Drawing alike on Beowulf and the Bible, Chesterton and Chaucer, Shakespeare, Sigrid Undset, Jesus and *Jayber Crow*, this well-disposed commissioner displays not only formidable breadth but excellent taste. Most prominent among his gifts, however, is the well-chosen anecdote culled from biographies of the famous and the obscure, or often enough from his own "boy's life" (for which Esolen thanks his mother in the book's dedication). If only while thus richly weaving such tapestries of Christian culture as make up the book's chapters, he would not continually sabotage his own work: "We must, then, kill the imagination" (p. xiii)! Short of spicing the speaking persona with a gratuitously tragic (or diabolical) dimension, this effect compromises the book's style somewhat. Two voices—Esolen's and that of his "evil twin"—change fluidly back and forth to

the point at which one wonders how the book might have read without a sarcastic alter ego: recast positively, that is, as Esolen speaking directly from the heart.

For this, of course, is exactly what the book is: Esolen's heartfelt plea to save culture through the preservation and cultivation of our children's imaginations. And understood in this way it accomplishes its goal admirably well. It is a veritable feast, not only for the starved imagination of our children, but for we ourselves who were and ultimately are these same children. An attentive reading of each chapter may even make things like scales fall from one's eyes. For precious truths, not only of childhood and education but of that to which these essentially refer—the glorious liturgy of the created cosmos—are here collected and uncovered, along with not a few tactics (subtle or otherwise) of the Great Enemy of the Imagination: fallen man himself, buttressed by structures of sin never so solidly constructed as in our own day.

Particularly valuable in this light is Esolen's analysis of the ways in which the contemporary culture—reinforced by virulent ideologies operating in the world of education—manages to undermine almost everything a child could believe in: truth (chapter one), the moral imagination of fairy tales (method four), the heroic and the patriotic (methods five and six), the nobility of love between the sexes (seven and eight), and the transcendence of reality itself (ten). As Esolen emphasizes, this amounts to the evisceration of just about everything that could so much as interest a child in the first place, let alone summon him to higher belief. And yet we must say that the situation is worse still, for this (anti-)culture is not content simply to wipe the slate clean, so to speak, of classical virtues, Christian revelation, and the beauties of a meaningfully ordered universe—all the things we hold so dear. Under the guise of a putative neutrality or “objective rationality,” it tacitly inculcates its own creed of liberal, positivist, and technocratic secularity—a creed which is far more coercive, pejoratively dogmatic, and indeed “superstitious” (cf. Blondel) in the end. Thus the problem today—as Esolen takes pains to demonstrate—is not so much that children are being offered, as if for the first time, the perverse option of rejecting a heritage which is actually best for them; it is rather that the very possibility of choosing what alone will make them happy is being systematically undermined or withheld.

Esolen's further critiques of today's obsessive and antiseptic cults of safety, efficiency, and conformity (which come to the same thing in the end: a bureaucratic insulation of life from life)—“Keep Your Children Indoors as Much as Possible” (method one), “Never Leave Children to Themselves” (two), “Keep Children Away from Machines and Machinists” (three)—are also of prime importance in this battle for the child's imagination. So are his warnings against the paradoxically carefree modern approaches to love, marriage, and sexuality (seven)—a landscape far more perilous than the Great Outdoors—and the even more frightening tendency to coalesce reductive and alienating visions of what it means to be a man or a woman into a mandatory, common anthropology (eight).

Most serious of all, however, is the concern that makes itself heard time and again throughout the book's chapters: the terrible “Kingdom of Noise” (nine), which is not unrelated to the commissioner's final counsel, “Deny the Transcendent” (ten). An ardent, articulate, and idealistic disciple of liberalism one can have the pleasure of battling, perhaps even the hope of convincing. But what can be said of the kind of person who seems ever on the increase today: the “man without a chest” (cf. 148) who is generally apathetic, whom you can hardly distract from his own habits of self-distraction long enough to challenge to the death?

It is probably just such a concern that accounts for the book's tone, which is full of sharp wit and irony, eloquence and even elegance. At times, however—and here I venture a friendly

criticism—its heavy sarcasm runs the risk of pigeonholing it into the category of a kind of sermon to the choir. I quite agree that things have become so serious today that the only thing left for them is a good sense of humor, maybe even a healthy dose of sarcasm. After all, the one thing Screwtape’s dark lord can’t stand is to be laughed at: a genuine, full-blooded, hearty human laugh—worst of all the sweet laugh of a child. Thus the demons in St Thérèse’s dream fly *from her*, and in the end the child on the present book’s cover poses a greater threat to the gargoyle that leers over him. Indeed, G.K. Chesterton, whose style often rings through Esolen’s prose, could perhaps—pending his canonization, which has recently advanced one tiny step—be named a doctor of the Church in this regard: *doctor hilaris*.

But Biblical injunctions not to scorn the Devil (e.g., Jude 1:9, 1 Peter 5:8) retain their force. For if we rush out to meet him with swords sharpened by anything like his own sarcasm, he is sure to have the last laugh—a laugh that echoes maddeningly in the mouths of an unsympathetic audience. We who would venerate the memory of Chesterton (or Thomas More, etc.) must take care, then, not to let the wine of their mirth turn sour with the gall of our contemporary crises. This seems to be a widespread temptation in the Catholic cultural criticism of our time—owing something, no doubt, to the unconscious influence of internet forms which lend themselves of their very logic to instantaneous, unedited, and anonymous commentary. Admittedly—and for many reasons—this is a temptation that seems to be getting harder to resist every year. But this only makes it all the more important never to allow one’s satire to relax into snarkiness—a trap which Esolen’s book, for all its virtues, does not in my opinion always succeed in avoiding.

All the same, the book is very funny—hilarious at times (and at others, I should add, wistful and melancholy by contrast). Certainly the choir and hopefully not a few stragglers in the back pew will be roused. Parents like me (or my wife who read it first) will find in it ample food for thought—nourishment for their own imaginations, not to mention those of their children—as well as courage for the battle and fair warning against some of the subtler tactics of the enemy. Indeed, books like Esolen’s are right on the mark in emphasizing childhood, education, and the Christian imagination as key to the renewal of Church and world. One day perhaps even our state school commissioner will come to see that his “empire of mass man” (216) is not worthy of preservation, that Catholic culture deserves neither persecution nor blame, and that the genuine goods anyone seeks can only stand by virtue of the proper cultivation of these other things.

James Stanley is a PhD student at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. He and his wife have three children.

