

THE NEW RELIGIONS OF AMERICA

II — *The Worship of Human Gods*

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MODERN Theosophy sprang into flower fifty years ago when agnosticism and theories of evolution had begun to undermine the traditional creeds. Even in this enlightened age human beings have a weakness for necromancy in some form or other, and the founders of the Theosophical Society gained many adherents by reviving ancient occultism in plausible modern guise. Human gods took the place of the Christian Deity, and for the old-fashioned heaven there was substituted a doctrine of progressive reincarnation.

THE decline of the last century was a wildly tormented epoch for mind and heart if ever there was one, and it is no mere accident that the Theosophical Society came into being during these chaotic years. The occidental world had crumbled into doubt and negation. With Strauss and Renan leading the way, there was a persistent effort to undermine the prestige of Christianity. In England the growth of scientific research had been accompanied by a reaction against traditional creeds. In America the faith of the pious was menaced by Robert Ingersoll. Iconoclasts and savants, like Thomas Huxley, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, Emile Littré, Claude Bernard, Auguste Comte, Ernest Haeckel, and especially the naturalist Charles Darwin, taught a system of "orderly development of life from simple to complex forms." For creation they substituted evolution. God the Father made way for a blind Mother indifferent to good and evil, soullessly dispensing pain and joy, life and death, driving all things forward without conscious intent in a monstrous progress. "Not alone the more ignoble forms of animalcular or animal life," asserted Tyndall, "not alone the exquisite and wonderful mechanism of the human body, but the human mind itself, all our philosophy, all our poetry, all our science, and all our art, — Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, and Raphael, — are potential in the fires of the sun."

In scientific circles, belief in the immortality of the soul seemed hopelessly old-fashioned, while in other circles, and chiefly among the ignorant, a protest was ejaculated by "Neo-Spiritualism", which resurrected, in vulgar and childish terms, the necromancy of yore. Such crises are favorable to the spread of occultism.

Occultism, which since the beginning of time has been an offshoot of religion and science, provides its own oracles, half rationalistic, half mystic, and these can be pressed into service by the Genii of the planet who are ever on the lookout for any means of preserving human beings from metaphysical starvation. Facing this epidemic of pessimism and despair, modern Europe was acutely in need of some injection that would reanimate limbs invaded by spiritual paralysis.

What kind of leader was anxiously awaited to conduct this quest of the soul? A scholar? Not precisely, since scholars were for the most part on the other side of the fence. Rather, a combination of apostle, compiler, and thaumaturge was needed. This being so, it is easier to understand the sudden world-wide explosion of Madame Blavatsky's fame and the success of her undertaking despite innumerable obstacles and misadventures. Whether or not she was a messenger of transcendental or actual personalities, she was incontestably an incarnation of the rebellious spirit of the time.

The incompleteness of science had rendered religion repellent to men who longed for some mystic panacea, which they found neither in the old creed nor in the new agnosticism. Madame Blavatsky appeared and offered these impatient souls an assemblage of Egyptian, Cabalistic, and Hindu beliefs so obsolete that they seemed new; and to bring them up to date she tried to accommodate them to the Darwinism and modernism then in vogue. This accounts for her pantheism, her wild evolutionistic theories, her over-praise of the powers of man, and her desperate endeavor to repopulate the deserted Sinai with revived gods from Olympus, Lebanon, and the Himalayas.

Her strange psychic temperament stood her in good stead. Moreover, thanks to her world-wide wanderings, her contact with mystics and seers, her gift of assimilation, her imagination, and her ability to fascinate, she was pre-ordained, — being half Asiatic and half European, — for the creation of the Theosophical Society which was founded on November 17, 1875, not in Europe, not in Asia, but in New York, the city of rejuvenation.

Thus on American, not to say Yankee, soil, Theosophism which has flowered in London, in India, even in Paris, had its root. America is more than a vast tract of land peopled by industrious

ances; it is an international meeting ground. It is not only the new world, but also the cradle of all new worlds. The soul of the Theosophical Society was, to be sure, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (H.P.B.), a Russian woman, but in the person of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, of Orange, New Jersey, the society welcomed its inevitable President. During and immediately after the Civil War, Colonel Olcott was especially appointed as counsel to inquire into departmental frauds and he was instrumental in putting a stop to abuses in the navy yards. His apprenticeship fitted him to become a superlative administrator. As a journalist, he was chosen by the New York "Sun" and the New York "Graphic" to investigate the spiritualistic manifestations at the Eddy Farm. There he met Madame Blavatsky, fell completely under her spell, and passed, bag and baggage, from spirits to Mahatmas.

"I was sent to America on purpose," H. P. B. wrote, "and sent to the Eddys. There I found Olcott in love with spirits, as he became in love with the Masters, later on. . . . I proved to him that all that mediums could do through spirits, others could do at will without spirits at all: that bells, and thought-reading, raps and physical phenomena, could be achieved by any one who had a faculty of acting in his physical body through the organs of his astral body; and I have had that faculty ever since I was four years old, as all my family know. . . . I said to him that I had known adepts, the 'Brothers', not only in India and beyond Ladack, but in Egypt and Syria. . . . I said and proved that They could perform marvelous phenomena; but I also said that it was rarely They could condescend to do so to satisfy inquirers."

A stroke of genius, indeed, on the part of Helena Petrovna, this double challenge to materialism and spiritualism! Unhappily she tried to substitute for the swarming of imps and spooks the chimerical interference of fantastic living beings who were, it seems, more at her disposal than she was at theirs. Better for her and us had she been content to stand on the solid ground of her proper subconscious capacities, serving truth as well as psychology. But she distrusted human nature and knew, from world-wide experience, that people crave the thrill of the unattainable. She assumed that her pupils would be more docile under the orders of an hypothetical adept of Thibet than she could hope to render them through the agency of her own living, visible self, no matter how wise and skilful she might be. This is a

pity, for instead of clearing away ancient necromantic superstitions, she built upon them a new over-belief, based on the worship of human gods, thus merely adding to the confusion of troubled hearts and imaginations. Instead of using to real advantage the ingeniousness and wit of Colonel Olcott, instead of profiting by his finesse and American common-sense, she bewildered him by vain marvels. And for his gentle credulity, she denominated him, in one of her letters, "the psychological baby", a description whose irreverence is not quite redeemed by its tenderness.

Although my generation was merely on the threshold of manhood at the end of the last century, it had lived through the moral tragedy to which I have alluded, and I knew the founders of modern Theosophy. I have never adopted their doctrine nor enrolled myself in their ranks, but I should be unjust to them did I not acknowledge that their teachings, particularly in their bearings on psychology, have been, for many, a solicitation to deeper thinking and a sort of mental bridge towards a reconciliation with the findings of modern science. On several occasions I met Colonel Olcott in Paris. An imposing pontifex, he was also a good fellow and an intriguing conversationalist. His fine, old, bearded face recalling the Moses of Michelangelo, and his slightly squinting eyes, acute as the eyes of a Hindu elephant and magnified by vast gold-rimmed spectacles, indicated a combination of Wall Street shrewdness and jungle revery. Withal he was a charming man and a sympathetic friend.

We passed delightful evenings together. After the theatre we would take "talking promenades" along the Champs Elysées. Once, dining at the home of Doctor Baraduc (famous for his discoveries in the *fluide vital*), the conversation turned on the immortality of the soul, as it very often does in France after dessert. It was the moment of the demi-tasse. Colonel Olcott asked for a piece of sugar. The bowl was brought and Madame Baraduc handed him the tongs. The witty pontifex regarded them in meditative silence, then declared, "They are not at all like the ones Madame Blavatsky once produced for me."

We waited eagerly for the anecdote. The Colonel continued in his leisurely manner. "We were on that occasion, as now, at the end of dinner. There were no sugar-tongs in the house. H. P. B.,

in her desire to be of service, did not hesitate to accomplish a miracle. 'Sugar-tongs?' she exclaimed. 'Don't worry, I will make a pair.' With her right hand she searched in the air and drew forth from it a strange utensil. To be truthful, it was not exactly the object asked for. What the other world sent us in our need was a cross between sugar-tongs and a pickle fork!"

We were staggered, but Madame Baraduc, an accomplished housekeeper, took a legitimate domestic interest in this *tour d'adresse*. She asked how it could be done. Her distinguished guest was quite ready to explain the metaphysical machinery behind this prowess. "H. P. B.," he said, with complete seriousness, "was taught by her masters how to coagulate atoms in the ether, that father of all things. Hence the elements necessary to the formation of the required object hastened to obey her. But as it happened, the creative idea, the archetype and pattern of the object required was on this occasion not distinct enough in the mind of the magician. Consequently she materialized hybrid tongs, which by the way, I have preserved in my private collection. The instrument is unique, and the slight mistake of the operator has given a dash of humor and originality to my psychic museum."

I was not much more than twenty, and thanks to a good conventional upbringing I had a bent towards swallowing with a becoming air all pronouncements that issued forth over imperturbable, long white beards. Yet some irrepressible wonderment must have been depicted in my eyes. The Colonel looked at me with a sympathetic smile. "The better to understand the wonderful practicality of our metaphysics," he explained, "you must one day visit us at our headquarters in Adyar and read some of our twenty thousand volumes. I know you like books and I am ready to put at your disposition my bungalow near Madras."

I made the blunder of a too quick and too grateful acceptance, and he added, "It is not for to-day, young man. But I will make a note to remember it at your next incarnation."

After this gracious but unentangling promise he took leave of us, with his most kindly pontifical blessing.

Having gained Olcott, which was necessary to her plans, H. P. B. cast her net over a magnificent prey, making of Mrs.

Annie Besant her assistant, and subsequently her successor. Mrs. Besant is a force in the United Kingdom. On the occasion of the jubilee of her public life, celebrated at Queen's Hall, London, July 23 of last year, she received the homage of political leaders (especially the socialists), philanthropists, reformers, pacifists, several governors of India, and a multitude of Hindu clubs and orders. The youngest of women, despite her seventy-seven years, "the finest orator of to-day" as well as "one of the greatest statesmen and builders of the Empire", she was greeted as the "mother of the world" with homages that would have befitted a Roman Caesar, and the Vice-President of the Theosophical Society signed a cablegram declaring, "In trying to imitate you, we feel we grow into divinity."

Such adulation should not blind one to the fact that Mrs. Besant, though immensely gifted and full of generous good intent, has sometimes been misguided in the causes she has espoused. Always susceptible to their nobler aspect, she has more than once been late in perceiving their perilousness and impracticality. The point that interests us in this discussion is how Mrs. Besant was impelled to serve the purposes of Madame Blavatsky, and how she, Christian and humanitarian, came to adopt a mystic and composite credo in which she has struggled, apparently without complete success, to liberate herself. Under her serenity she has always seemed to be the most tormented Eve of our age; George Sand, George Eliot, Marie Bashkirtseff, compared with her, are models of stability. Alternately an evangelist, the wife of an austere pastor, an atheist, free-thinker, eugenist, and finally Pope of theosophy, thaumaturge, seeress, emancipator of India, messenger of unseen human divinities, and educator of a future Messiah!

After leaving her husband, the Reverend Frank Besant, she became the collaborator of Charles Bradlaugh and Herbert Burrows in their campaign for free thought, atheism, and socialism. She was seeking her way. Disillusioned in this atmosphere of materialism, and no doubt subconsciously haunted by memories of the fairy-tales of her childhood in Ireland, she turned to another new interest. William Stead, editor of the "Review of Reviews", gave her a letter of introduction to Madame Blavatsky.

After long travels, this wandering Slav had reappeared in

Europe like some queen of the Tarot, an incarnate symbol of alchemy, with her enigmatic aureole, — her head enveloped in a fichu, her shapeless robe draped on a body distended by disease. Amidst a mass of flesh and stuffs her eyes glittered, like the legendary carbuncles beneath the forehead of the unicorn. H. P. B. could with one glance pierce to the heart of a visitor; she had an extraordinary ability to penetrate character and discover weak sides from which to lay siege to a soul. Was it fascination, *la prise du regard*? Whatever the secret may have been, it was more than enough to decide a destiny.

One can imagine the first encounters of the Russian *guru* and the Irish woman who was to become her *chela*. “Your intellectual martyrdom is at an end,” proclaimed she of the irresistible eyes. “Truth lies in your own hands, — not the abstraction provided by science, not the illusion imposed upon us by the ordinary creeds, but a tangible, living, all-pervasive fact.”

“Alas! the search for the light is endless, — and life is so short.”

“My friend, for our search we have the infinity of time. During existence after existence we struggle and grope, we err and droop until the day, — and this day is dawning for you, — when initiation unseals our eyes. Then is the mantle of Isis torn away. We are happy because we know. . . . Your appointed hour has come.”

“How can you divine this?”

“I read it in your astral atmosphere. I behold the sum of your past deeds — your Karma. Our deeds follow us; about us we bear our roses and our thorns. By your sorrows and your selfless labor you have touched the heart of the Masters, the Mahatmas.”

As Mrs. Besant recounted her visions and premonitions, and expressed her contempt for the inadequacy of the would-be science of that day, Madame Blavatsky burst into laughter.

“They know nothing of the seven vehicles of our inner being, the mysterious keyboard which gives the seven sounds of the soul. Their psychology, by omitting the soul, ignores our secret capacities. In us there are depths to which science has not penetrated, — not only on the physical plane, but on mental, astral, and even divine planes. Believe me, there is a point at which we are one with the infinite mind. It is possible for us to become gods, nay God himself.”

“Can you give me proofs? . . . Mediums I have known, but they are inconsistent, and often deceptive. Psychic experiences I have had, but intermittently.”

Through London’s thick fog dusk was creeping. The lamp had not yet been lighted. Madame Blavatsky had grown silent, her

image more and more Asiatic, more foreign. The philosopher was transforming herself into the miracle-worker. The tendrils of her waving auburn hair stiffened and darkened to jet. A delicate vapor emanated from her head and clung about her shoulders. She was adumbrated by a succession of unearthly forces; new lives seemed to have sprung from the ether between them. A voice, coming from nowhere, invited the neophyte to "behold and learn!" In place of the stout Slav was a strange diaphaneity surrounded by invisible hierarchies: thought forms, nature spirits, unknown influences from unknown sources? Who can say? She pretended they were Hindu and Thibetan Mahatmas, jostling Western adepts, the Neapolitan Cagliostro and the French Count of St Germain, — either human gods living in eternal ecstasy at the heart of inextricable forests; or men walking among men still enjoying powers supreme, not dead though born centuries ago. And in the room whose obscurity was relieved only by the disquieting reflections from the street lamps, the ethereal vibrations brought a dream of dim, bearded visages and piercing eyes, coiled turbans, powdered perukes, and ruffles . . .

. . . The spell was suddenly dissolved by the tardy lamp, and the mirage faded from the visitor's eyes, which now beheld only the unmistakably corporeal Slav and the waving auburn hair.

"You have had only a glimpse of the real mystery concealed from the profane," said the conjurer. "Follow us and you will share the reality of the Masters. They are thoughtful guardians of the destiny of our planet, ready to unveil themselves to him who is strong and pure enough to harken to their silent voice."

In her *Autobiography* Annie Besant affirms that there was no deception, that she knows because she has seen. That the soul exists and that the body is not our true ego, she claims to have verified by personal experience. More than that, she asserts that even in this life she can, through supernormal trances, reach the far distant Masters who are still human and walking on this earth of ours. She asserts that they teach her sublime verities, which are registered in her physical brain upon awakening. During the summer of 1889 she had at Fontainebleau her first direct proof. Sleeping in her room, she suddenly awoke, shivering. All around her, and above an ocean of electric waves, clothed in

aromatic splendor, appeared the sidereal form of the One she had long craved to see.

Of course these human gods seem to bear a striking resemblance to the sprites of the spiritistic seances, and many skeptics will recall a report made by the London Society of Psychical Research of Adyar's secret shrine and Mahatmas, alas, *too* material, as they were exhibited in the moonlight with false beards and turbans. Psychiatrists explain that, when seen by sincere persons under conditions that do not admit of fraudulence, such visions amount to mere hallucinations or complexes externalized. Theologians have insinuated that fiends have sometimes put on the guise of Angels of Light . . .

That hypersensitive persons are able to visualize their own dreams, good or bad, there is no doubt. But I wish to be fair to the followers of Madame Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant, among whom I number many friends. I do not believe that fraud is at the bottom of such experiments, — certainly not in all cases. Most of us have the impression that near us there is a mysterious friend, a messenger of Providence watching over us and at times offering us secret advice or consolation, if not positive premonitions. Who has not trembled at the winged caress of the Guardian Angel sung by Robert Browning? Where disagreement begins is in the name we choose to give to this mysterious agency. Without being guilty of charlatanism certain emotionalists may objectivate an idea, color it, and see it depicted according to their beliefs, their reading, or their natural disposition.

On the other hand, at the epoch when H. P. B. made her entrance into the philosophical world, prodigies and wonders were much spoken of. Popularity was accorded to legends of the physical survival of extraordinary men, such as the Wandering Jew, Barbarossa, Louis XVII, the Count of St Germain, who according to Voltaire, "was seen everywhere at the same time and never died," and a Tsar of Russia who was given to concealing himself in monasteries. A considerable vogue welcomed Lord Lytton's romance *Zanoni*, whose hero was always young, though many centuries old. I may recall that in one of my own novels, *L'Eternelle Poupée*, I created a personage endowed with fabulous powers, although, as in the case of the English writer, with no attempt at historical verity. At that period the great man was

still an heraldic lion. The democratic tendency to dead-leveling had not done away with the hero-worship of our fathers, — the Nietzschean *Übermensch* hailed by Emerson and Carlyle and doomed to failure before his advent.

Madame Blavatsky lived her years of apprenticeship in Paris where she heard of Saint Simon and Fourier and so thoroughly imbibed their dream of a progressive humanity that she felt herself in possession of new senses. It was not a far step to the theosophical Mahatmas. In ancient Greece and in India, both ancient and modern men were and still are easily deified. Mahatma means simply "a great soul". The title was recently bestowed upon Ghandi, who however puts forth no pretensions to apparitions or invisibility. However we may choose to regard this ideal of divine perfection realized in a man, — as a figure of speech, an hyperbole, a catachresis, — it can never be a fact. Victor Hugo, a connoisseur of great men by virtue of his own greatness, formulated an opinion of them which may be accepted as final. In *Post-Scriptum de Ma Vie* he said:

"Schlegel one day considering all those geniuses, asked this question, which in him was a flash of enthusiasm, while with Fourier and Saint Simon it has become a systematized pretense, 'Are such men merely men?'"

"Yes they are men. It is their misery and their glory. They hunger and thirst; they must submit to blood, temperament, and fever; they are subjects of women, pain, and pleasure; they, with all men, are victims of bents, allurements, snares; they are, like all men, prisoners of flesh with its maladies, and with its enticements which are maladies also. They have their beast."

It is true that beyond the great man looms the saint, the vanquisher of nature, the victor of himself, and a positive maker of miracles. But the saint is humble; he does not seek worship. According to Thomas À Kempis he "likes to be despised". His touchstone is self-rejection, not to mention other virtues for which Mahatmas are not noted. Far from believing himself a god, as do the members of the White Lodge, he knows better than do we, the distance that separates man from his Maker, for he has heard the Voice, and having approached the splendor he has, in its effulgence, taken cognizance of all that is diminutive in us mortals.

I am inclined to surmise that Madame Blavatsky, through the

inviting legend of the Masters, wished to convey an esoteric truth reserved for a few sages. Psychology had not yet become a science, and in the limbo of its nebular beginnings she was struggling upward in an attempt to express the notion of our higher self. In this sense she deserves our homage as a pioneer. In this series of articles it is my duty and my desire to give credit to the founders of new religions. While resting firmly upon the rock of Christianity I am painstakingly eager to find what there is of good and true in their original assertions. Madame Blavatsky, who was a genius after her own fashion, detected the divine spark within us and magnified it into Mahatmas. Man is certainly greater than he believes himself to be, and may better himself. Of this I am convinced. I believe that psychology, the study of ourselves, — provided it does not lose itself in the vagaries of an ill-regulated imagination, — may help us to get nearer to our ideal and thus better to comprehend and profit by religion.

The doctrines of modern Theosophy are simple enough. Every member of the external order is bound only by the acceptance of Universal Brotherhood, first object of the society, which does not recognize any distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color. Then comes the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science. The third aim has a more practical outlook, being the investigation of Nature and man's unexplained laws and powers. According to *Secret Doctrine*, the Theosophical Bible, from the pen of Madame Blavatsky, all souls are fundamentally identical with the cosmic Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root. Each individual human being is obliged to pass through an indefinite series of existences, in accordance with Karmic Law, in order to reach the pantheistic god.

These doctrines, despite many contradictions and glittering bric-à-brac, — perhaps *because* of them, — have been a stimulus to many an intellect of the calibre of a Shaw, a Bergson, a Maeterlinck. Theosophy has penetrated into remote, provincial towns buried in trivial occupations, where, thanks to its lodges, philosophical problems have been agitated. There it has fostered the inner life and meditation of souls which were in danger of being carried away forever on a tide of platitudes. Through the Theosophical Society many have passed who have not tarried, but all have kept something of value as the result of their search-

ing. Theosophy has prepared many a layman for a quicker comprehension of modern discoveries in science. The great centres of civilization have been visited by messengers from the Orient. Our libraries have been enriched by translations of books from the East. All this seems to me permanently valuable, and far more important than the actual number of adherents who, scattered into five hundred and twenty sections across the face of the earth, comprise, — taking into account the schismatics and sympathizers, — several hundred thousand, including more than fifty thousand in America.

We have spoken here only of the soothing aroma of the theosophical flower itself. It may be fitting to close our summary with a tribute to Annie Besant, the unique jewel on this multi-petaled lotus. In London and in Paris I had met Mrs. Besant, still a mortal among mortals. But at the time of our last conversation she was already a little beyond our reach. Squatted like a white-haired goddess of the Ramayana, draped in a mythologic robe which gave her the air of some sexless Seraphita-Seraphitus of Asia, she extended me a gracious welcome at the Hindu College near Benares. She spoke oracularly, with an impersonal charm.

For the most part Annie Besant lives in Adyar, near Madras, an idol of the theosophical Mecca, surrounded by the images of great prophets and Asiatic gods, taking her place in the ranks of those deities who were served by H. P. B.

But Annie Besant has progressed through many changes; there is no assurance that she will not tire of being a goddess. She may have in reserve one more *coup de théâtre*, a final complete "right about" which while stupefying her worshippers would afford the purest joy to many of her sincere admirers. She can scarcely take deep satisfaction in the company of Koot Hoomi, and Moria, those Blavatskian postulates, and of Cagliostro and St Germain, those legendary histrions. She belongs to a better folk. She has often proclaimed the teachings of the Inner Voice, of the real Master, whose temple is our body and our mind. At Queen's Hall she declared her faith in "the Christ and the God within us, for whom alone we can be strong, by whom alone we can conquer the obstacles in the way." This One awaits her, I am sure; He is the Christ of her Irish childhood, the Christ of little children and saints, and of the Evangelists.

WHAT IS A PICTURE?

MURIEL CIOLKOWSKA

ARE pictures furniture or ornaments, or do they exist for definite reasons that have nothing to do with the use to which they are commonly put? This critic asserts that, among other functions which they perform, pictures help us to awareness of ourselves, and she offers succinct hints as to the place which art should occupy in civilization. The essay is published as a prelude to a debate on the merits of "so-called" modern paintings which will appear in the June number.

*"A poem is a painting without visible shape,
and a painting is poetry put into form."*

Old Chinese Saying.

WHEN I ask, "What is a picture?" most people will be surprised by the simplicity of the question. Others will say it has often been answered, — as, for instance, by Leonardo, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Goethe, Ruskin, W. Clive Bell. Some advised artists how to paint; others endeavored to define beauty and the love thereof; others again probed the artistic principle which may be the *mobile* yet is not necessarily the motive of pictorial presentation. The impulse which drives artists to commit pictures and amateurs to look at them may still bear examination, and the more so in view of the constant increase in the pictorial output in the latter years and the interest evinced therein.

When the first pictures were painted, did artists consider the public demand for them? Is it not probable that the demand followed rather than provoked the supply? This would seem certain. Is it not possible that if artists suddenly stopped painting pictures the world would forget all about wanting them?

Is the impulse to draw, that is, to create forms in two or three dimensions, pictorially or plastically, actuated by analogous *mobiles* in all degrees of civilization and intelligence? The fact that children are fond of drawing does not prove it is an instinct or an action in which conscious thought has little or no part. It proves, indeed, exactly the opposite. The child begins to draw