How can we give substance to the early years of our lives?

It was an ambition common to many writers during the 'golden age' of childhood to do just that, an ambition that extended far beyond the self-imposed boundaries of the new academic study of child psychology.

It would be possible to describe childhood experience by the method we used to describe confinement; that is, by following the transformations in the sense of time, space and the body which differentiates early experience from what we take for granted as 'normal' to the adult. Indeed this, to a large extent, is the method adopted by Piaget, whose books provide a very detailed description of the child's conception (if not experience) of all those categorical frameworks that order the adult, rational world. This description, however, and the method of supporting it is, for our purposes, too rigorously unsubordinated under a paradigmatic 'development' of reason. Not only are the 'cognitive' faculties of the child singled out for special attention, but the ordered and necessary 'progress' (in the sense of a rationally understandable development). In these faculties towards the standards of abstract logic, becomes the guiding thread of the entire project.

In this, Piaget was the first to take the study of children beyond the 'age of childhood' which imparted to such investigations their original impetus. The interests of contemporary thought is once again in 'mediation'. Childhood must be connected to adult experience, adult experience must itself be a species of reason, the whole comprehensible through a 'structure' common to all. The writers of the 'age of childhood' took a different view. They were concerned with the profound 'otherness' of childhood, and, as already stressed, above all with the otherness of their own childhood. The vanished world of childhood could not, therefore, be described in terms that shared, simply through a natural process of 'development' in our own framework of truth. The 'golden age' described its children variously, but common to this variety was the bewildered admiration with
which they beheld the mysterious business of 'growing-up'. Many no doubt conceived, or misconceived, children's activities through a romantic disregard for many of the obtrusive 'facts' of child-life, and allowed a nostalgic longing for its presumed simplicities and pleasures to colour their perception. But these 'errors' are themselves indicative of the separation that had been brought about between the adult and child world, and the very real intellectual difficulty involved in accounting for the regular passage, in one direction only, between them.

It is more profitable, then, to describe childhood directly in terms of its own 'categories'. Its over-riding principle is, in opposition to confinement, motion. We first recognise confinement through immobility; but in childhood nothing is still, movement is its essential mode of being. The child never remains unmoved. It is exactly this perpetual motion, shifting boundaries, multiplicity of points of view and forms of organisation, variety and changeability of experience, that defines childhood. The experience of childhood is of continually changing states. It is a kaleidoscopic world that obeys its own laws of motion rather than the interests or will of individuals. Children are caught up in its movements and childhood is contained within, rather than expressed by, its perpetual dynamism.

It is the denial of this principle of motion (among other things) that so angered Maria Montessori and prompted her educational experiments. She quotes for example, in her Advanced Montessori Method a particularly grotesque official regulation in respect of the manner in which the schoolchild should be made to sit. 'The child', it insists, 'seated at the table, should have his feet planted flat upon the ground, or upon a foot-rest. The legs should be at right-angles to the thighs, as should the thighs be to the trunk, save for a slight inclination of the bench itself' and so it runs on in meticulous detail, finishing 'the forearms, two-thirds of which should be laid upon the table, should rest on it, but without leaning upon it.' This imperative to 'correct' posture was re-enforced by specially designed workdesks that prevented all superfluous movement. Montessori later wrote, in The Discovery of the Child, 'the bench is made in such a way that as far as possible the child is left motionless'. And such unnatural constraint, according to her, not only made school a nightmare for most children and made learning almost impossible, it gave rise also to a whole medical