

The Canonization of Ovide Decroly as a "Saint" of the New Education

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If any Belgian educator belongs to the canon of the New Education, it is certainly Ovide Decroly (1871-1932). Particularly in southern Europe and in many Latin American countries,¹ the ideas and the work of this French-speaking Brussels doctor have been inspirational for a movement that projected itself worldwide—albeit in different modes—as the “child-oriented,” “progressive” alternative to the rigid, traditional school.² As recent research has shown,³ this movement manifested itself primarily by means of the development of its own language and discourse in which the “new school” was projected into a “new” society. However, ultimately, it turned out that the “new” did not involve a radical break with the modernizing trends from

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¹See, for example, Antonio Nóvoa, “Regards nouveaux sur l’éducation nouvelle,” in *Le don de la parole. Mélanges offerts à Daniel Hameline pour son soixante-cinquième anniversaire* ed. Nanine Charbonnel (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 86; Marcelo Caruso, “¿Una Nave sin Puerto Definitivo? Antecedentes, tendencias e interpretaciones alrededor del movimiento de la Escuela Nueva,” in *La Escuela como Máquina de Educar. Tres escritos sobre un proyecto de la modernidad* eds. Pablo Pineau, Inès Dussel, and Marcelo Caruso (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), 93-134.

²Hermann Röhrs and Volkert Lenhart, eds., *Progressive Education Across the Continents* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1995).

³Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies. Toward a New Cultural History of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 87-101; Kevin J. Brehony, “From the Particular to the General, The Continuous to the Discontinuous: Progressive Education Revisited,” *History of Education* 30:5 (September 2001): 413-432.

which it emerged and that it wanted to combat.⁴ Without going further into the discussion of its success or failure, about continuity and discontinuity of discourse and movement, we want to show that the construction of the self-discourse of the New Education was largely determined by the extolling of its own merits. We will do this via the example of Ovide Decroly. This extolling was generally done by epigones who, from the immediate circle of often charismatic school reformers, gazed in wonder on the work of the Master (or Mistress) and ascribed to his or her "method" an authenticity that it did not actually have.

Decroly acquired renown primarily because he, like Maria Montessori, developed his interest in the education of mentally handicapped children from his medical concerns, wanted to rehabilitate them for society, and used his own resources to take in a small number of these children so he could closely study their development. In the meantime, he had also founded a school for "normal" children, and there he developed, again like Montessori, his "own" educational method partly on the basis of his psychological and physiological insights into the "abnormal" child. Considering that the child observes things globally, Decroly presented the subject matter not in courses but in larger wholes. He linked subject matter, which had to be processed actively and expressively, to the child's "centers of interest" which were organized around four biological needs: the need for food, protection, and defense (these all went back to the basic need for self-preservation) and the instinct of solidarity or the basic need to assure the survival of one's own species. From this perspective, much attention was devoted to social development, which amounted to adaptation to the environment of the bourgeois society in the line of, for example, John Dewey. Indeed, Decroly is sometimes called the "John Dewey of Europe."⁵ Personality formation was conceived as a collective event, as much as possible in a spirit of "self government."

Summaries of this approach are available in encyclopedias, reviews, histories of great thinkers, and textbooks of the history of education in which attention⁶ is generally given to Decroly who, alongside Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi etc., has acquired

⁴Jürgen Oelkers, *Reformpädagogik. Eine kritische Dogmengeschichte*, 3th ed. (Weinheim/München: Juventa, 1996).

⁵Guy Montrose Whipple, ed., *The Twenty-Eighth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Preschool and Parental Education* (Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1929), 17.

⁶For example René Hubert, *Histoire de la Pédagogie* (Paris: PUF, 1949), 129; Jean Palméro, *Histoire des Institutions et des Doctrines pédagogiques par les textes* (Paris: Sudel, 1955), 404-408; Arnould Clause, *Introduction à l'Histoire de l'Éducation* (Brussels: De Boeck, 1951), 128-154; idem., *Essai sur l'École Nouvelle* (Brussels: Labor, 1950); Johan Janssen and S. Visser, *Van Plato tot Decroly: studieboek der historische pedagogiek*, 15th ed. (Purmerend: Muusses, 1966), 284.

a place in the pantheon of the hundred most important “pedagogues,” a “pioneer” in the New Education. Even though it received considerable resonance in the educational tradition, Decroly’s work never had the same influence as that of the stars in New Education: Dewey and Montessori. It could well be that Decroly expressed himself almost exclusively in French, even in his communication with Dewey, his American source of inspiration. Moreover, unlike his rival and contemporary, Maria Montessori (who survived him by twenty years), he had no network to watch anxiously over the production and dissemination of his materials. Indeed, the children or the teachers themselves made the educational material Decroly required for his interest-center method, eliminating the need for industrial production.⁸ As Madame Decroly expressed it in the biography of her husband: “Doctor Decroly felt that one must live nearer to nature, take as objects not objects with conventional forms but rather those that one had around one, objects that one could feel, that one could taste.”⁹ One can hardly ascribe the difference with Montessori’s “reception” to the originality or pseudo-originality of the ideas. As was the case with many educational reformers, Decroly’s theoretical framework consisted of an eclectic complex of educational principles that were applied here and there in the New Education. Ultimately, within the New Education and its organization, the New Education Fellowship, nobody objected to mutual paraphrasing or even to copying just as long as the “message” came through.

But none of this kept Decroly from surrounding himself with a group of disciples who elevated him onto the pedestal of educational tradition. These *Decrolyens*, as Arnold Clausse called them,¹⁰ attributed to Decroly’s work an exceptional position within the canon and the discourse of reform pedagogy that it simply does not have. And what drove them was primarily their admiration for the man in whom they “believed.” Indeed, virtually all authors are in agreement on one thing: Decroly was not just a great scholar who was far ahead of his time but was above all a man of practice. His unbridled efforts, his enthusiasm, his dedication, his work, and his charisma as an educator inspired those who had to face the challenges in the field every day. But that charisma and the resulting admiration also

⁷Francine Dubreucq, “Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932),” in *Penseurs de l’éducation* ed. Zaghoul Morsy (Paris: Editions UNESCO, 1994), 1: 251-276. This can also be consulted at http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/34_26.pdf. We want to thank Mrs. Dubreucq, former director of the *Ecole Decroly-Ecole de l’Ermitage* and the present director of the *Centre d’Etudes decrolyennes* (C.E.D.) in Brussels (Uccle, Avenue Montana, 15), as well as the other staff of the C.E.D. for their cooperation in the heuristic process and for placing Decroly’s archives at our disposal.

⁸Marjan Schwegman, *Maria Montessori 1870-1952. Kind van haar tijd. Vrouw van de wereld* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).

⁹Marie-Agnès Guisset, “Biographie de Ovide Decroly” (Documents bio-bibliographiques, Uccle: C.E.D., n.d.).

¹⁰See Arnould Clausse, *Essai sur l’Ecole Nouvelle* (Brussels: Labor, 1950), 73.

minimized the distance between biography and hagiography after his death. This fate had also befallen other educational celebrities,¹¹ not just because educational historiography about teacher training has long told such founding stories¹² but also and in particular because practitioners in general and modernizers or believers in particular find it difficult to look at the past without “euphoric enthusiasm.”¹³ “Modernizers,” as Jürgen Oelkers pointed out, need to connect with acts of heroism in the educational tradition in order to be able to legitimize their “child-oriented” action by calling it “progressive.”¹⁴ It is for this reason that our endeavors to demythologize the history of education (or to demystify it as Hélène Leenders calls the process as regards Montessori),¹⁵ including its treatment of Decroly,¹⁶ have not been devoted to the “modernizers,” although the guardians of the myth do have a vital role in our research as direct and indirect suppliers of the factual material.

¹¹About Pestalozzi see: Marc Depaepe and Hans Van Crombrugge, “Using or Abusing the Educational Past?—Some Methodological Reflections on the Place of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in the Educational Historiography,” in *Pestalozzi in China. International Academic Symposium on the Occasion of the Publication of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's Selected Works in Chinese* ed. Hans Gehrig (Zürich: Pestalozzianum, 1995), 51–62; about Comenius: see Johan C. Sturm and Leendert F. Groenendijk, “On the Use and Abuse of Great Educators: The Case of Comenius in the Low Countries,” *Paedagogica Historica* XXXV/1 (1999): 111–124.

¹²Marc Depaepe, “Entre pédagogie et histoire. Questions et remarques sur l'évolution des objectifs de l'enseignement de l'histoire de l'éducation,” *Histoire de l'éducation* 77 (January 1998): 3–18.

¹³Claude Moucher, “La Reformpädagogik, controverses autour d'une histoire et d'un concept,” *Paedagogica Historica* XXXI/3 (1995): 769–785; Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, “Reformpädagogik. Erneuter Versuch, ein erstaunliches Phänomen zu verstehen,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 40:4 (1994): 602. Or, in other words: “au-delà de l'histoire hagiographique ou polémique...”, after the subtitle of Daniel Hameline, Jürgen Helmchen, and Jürgen Oelkers, eds., *L'éducation nouvelle et les enjeux de son histoire. Actes du colloque international des Archives Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau: L'éducation nouvelle, au-delà de l'histoire hagiographique ou polémique*, Genève, Avril 1992 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992).

¹⁴Tenorth stated it himself—on the occasion of a review of Winfried Böhm & Jürgen Oelkers, eds., *Reformpädagogik kontrovers* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 1995)—with regard to the “euphoric enthusiasm” of the practitioners by the reform pedagogy: “Die ‘Euphorie’ der Praktiker wird sich von bildungshistorischer Forschung wahrscheinlich nicht entnüchtern lassen; den für den Praktiker bleibt das Reformmotiv unentbehrlich, weil er sich mit eigenen Wirklichkeit handelnd anders nicht umgehen kann. Jürgen Oelkers sagt daher zu Recht, was zur praktischen Legitimation und Kontinuität der Reformpädagogik als einer Handlungsfiktion gesagt werden muß: ‘Wie anders sollte man die Pädagogik pädagogisieren?’”, also auf die Erfahrung der Pädagogik anders antworten als durch den pädagogischen Mut, legitime Erziehung immer neu zu verstehen.” (*Paedagogica Historica* XXXII/3 (1996): 791.)

¹⁵Hélène Leenders, *Montessori im faschistischen Italien. Geschichte einer Rezeption* (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 2000).

¹⁶For a general approach, see, for example, Marc Depaepe, *De pedagogisering achterna. Aanzet tot een genealogie van de pedagogische mentaliteit in de voorbije 250 jaar* (Leuven/Amersfoort: Acco, 2000), 285; Idem, “Demythologizing the Educational Past: An Endless Task in History of Education,” *Historical Studies in Education/ Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* IX/2 (1997): 208–223; Idem, “Demythologizing the Educational Past: An Endless Task in History of Education,” in *History of Education: Major Themes*, vol. 1, *Debates on the History of Education* ed. Roy Lowe (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 23.

Thus we have every reason to reduce the myth to more realistic proportions. This is not to say that we consider the hagiographer to be a criminal,¹⁷ but the truth does have its rights. The demand for demystification is made even more acute by the observation that many contradictions—one more comical than the other: for example some Dutch scholars see him as a “French-speaking Fleming”¹⁸ or speak invariably of the *Ecole de l’hermitage*¹⁹ or of *Décroly*²⁰—and even untruths²¹ have crept into the image formation of Decroly. Since the veneration of Decroly is deeply established in Belgium as well as abroad,²² we pause here at the question of how the canonization of Decroly historically began. Where and when, how and by whom, in other words, have fact and fiction become entwined?

MYTH FORMATION IN DECROLY’S CIRCLE

The source: Madame Decroly

The creation of the myth around Decroly in all probability came about within his own circle, and the role of his wife, Marie-Agnès Guisset (1875–1953), can hardly be underestimated. She also represented a key figure in the success of his career. Without her inheritance, Decroly would have had great difficulty in financing his projects. His professional income was initially limited to what he received as Brussel’s city health officer, later supplemented by what he received from his secondary educational activities. The latter came partly from his investment in his “own” institutions. In addition, Decroly’s wife, who had studied to become a teacher for two years, served as a partner in his projects. She made notes of his observations, accompanied him to innumerable conferences, summarized books and

¹⁷Daniel Hameline, “Avant-propos,” in *L’éducation nouvelle et les enjeux de son histoire* eds. Hameline, Helmchen, and Oelkers, II.

¹⁸Henk C. de Wolf, “Ovide Decroly,” in *Onderwijskundigen van de twintigste eeuw* eds. Q.L. van der Meer and H. Bergman (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1975), 73–86.

¹⁹W.C. van der Waal, *Alles was reeds van verre tijden . . . Inleiding tot de studie van de historische pedagogiek* (Amsterdam: Duwaer, [before 1961]), 98.

²⁰Barbara C. de Jong, “Jan Ligthart (1859–1916). Een schoolmeester-pedagoog uit de Schilderswijk,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Utrecht, 1996).

²¹An example by way of illustration is the mention of an erroneous date of death cited in, among others, Jozef E. Verheyen, “Decroly (Prof. Dr. Ovide),” in *Paedagogische Encyclopaedie I-II* eds. Jozef E. Verheyen and Rommert Casimir (Antwerp: De Sikkell, 1939) 329. One could construct a genealogy of such an error; we will have occasion to point out other errors.

²²Respectively to Jozef E. Verheyen, “Allocution—Toespraak,” in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly. Huldebetoen aan Dr. Decroly, 23–24–25 Novembre—November 1952. Discours Prononcés lors de la Séance Solennelle qui a eu lieu dans la Grande Salle du Palais des Beaux-Arts à Bruxelles le Dimanche 23 Novembre 1952. Toespraken gehouden tijdens de Plechtige Zitting die gehouden werd in de Grote Zaal van het Paleis voor Schone Kunsten te Brussel op Zondag 23 November 1952* (1952), 24–25; Valère Van Coppenolle, *De activiteit op school. Bondig historisch overzicht* (Torhout: Pyck, 1939), 96–97 [= *Opvoedkundige brochurenreeks van de Studiekringen van het Christen Onderwijsverbond* 12]; Georges Meuris, “Une belle page de l’histoire de la pédagogie: la figure et l’œuvre d’Ovide Decroly (1871–1932),” *La Revue des Ecoles* 87 (1981–1982): 198–208; Fernand Dubois, “Il est entré dans la légende,” *Vers l’Ecole active* (October 1932): 1.

articles, did his translations, and so on. In addition, she wrote a biography of him (and of herself): "His work was for me like a child I had brought up with him; for us both it was what most occupied our thoughts. . . . Maintaining his memory has always been my principal thought, the goal I pursue, and my reason for living."²³ Two handwritten versions of this biography, recorded in school notebooks, are located at the *Center d'Etudes decrolyennes* in Uccle. They presumably date from the early 1950s and are linked to a number of biographical letters that Marie-Agnès Guisset wrote in 1953, the year of her death, to the director of the *Ermitage*. She based her work largely on published material on Decroly, including the *Hommage* of 1933.

Thus, Mrs. Decroly used publications based on primary source material that she had originally provided, such as that of Amélie Hamaïde (1888-1970) author of the world-renowned *La méthode Decroly*, and that of Cornelia Philippi-Siewertsz van Reesema (1880-1963), who also published reports on Decroly's educational activities while he was still alive, and of René Jadot, his son-in-law, who played a significant role in the myth formation. This included the indisputable influence on Decroly's work from his upbringing at home—he reportedly inherited from his mother a love of art and music and from his father his love for observation in nature as well as for education. That Decroly was a poor pupil at times, despite his particularly clever temperament and his brilliant student career in medicine (to which, according to tradition, he already felt called at the age of six!), was blamed on the incompetence of his teachers and to the remoteness from real life of the material taught. This explanation naturally fit the rhetoric of the New Education,²⁴ which wanted to adapt the school to life.²⁵

The Creators of the Myth

Amélie Hamaïde worked between 1911 and 1934 at the *Ecole de l'Ermitage in Brussels*.²⁶ As an "implementer" of Decroly's ideas, she saw it as

²³Guisset, "Biographie de Ovide Decroly".

²⁴Jürgen Oelkers, "Die "neue Erziehung" im Diskurs der Reformpädagogik," in *Die neue Erziehung. Beiträge zur Internationalität der Reformpädagogik* eds. Jürgen Oelkers and Fritz Osterwalder (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 13-41. Reference is made here to Decroly who, as the founder of the philosophy "pour la vie, par la vie," was promoted to spiritual thinker of pedagogy "vom Kinde aus", "der platonische Ewigkeit vor Augen hat," which of itself stands pretty much in opposition to his alleged empirical research. But, of course, this is not the only paradox in the "New Education."

²⁵Whether she succeeded in this is another question. The opposite appears more likely to us, that life adapted to the school. See Marc Depaepe et al., *Order in Progress. Everyday Educational Practice in Primary Schools: Belgium, 1880-1970* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2000), 265. [= *Studia Paedagogica New Series* 29.]

²⁶Amélie Hamaïde (1888-1970): as a teacher who graduated in 1909, she received the diploma of pedagogue from the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* in 1921. After a time as directress of the *Ecole de l'Ermitage*, she founded her own *Ecole nouvelle Amélie Hamaïde* in Ixelles (Brussels) in 1934.

part of her duty in the early 1920s to synthesize and systematize his method. Of course, it would be difficult to establish the extent to which the Montessori's successful example, whose "method" was published for the first time in 1909,²⁷ served as her model, although Hamaïde did her best to demonstrate the superiority of Decroly's approach. "The method of Montessori," she wrote, "is to the method of Decroly what broken and dead branches are to intact and living trees."²⁸ Claparède, too, chipped in. In the foreword to her book, he praised the effort of his "old friend," who had succeeded in bringing theory into harmony with day-to-day practice. In the battle for truth and progress, this gave him precedence over other celebrities such as Binet, Montessori, Lighthart, Dewey, and Kerschensteiner.²⁹ Naturally, Hamaïde herself in the introductory chapter mentioned the foundation of the school in the Rue de l'Ermitage in 1907, "a stone's throw from Avenue Louise." That Decroly had founded the school was interpreted partly from a succinct biographical perspective with the now familiar reasoning that dealing with the "retarded and abnormal" (from 1901 on at Rue de la Vanne 47 and from 1909 on at Vossegat 2 in Uccle) compelled him to prepare the child "through life for life."³⁰

A similar tone was struck by Siewertsz van Reesema who dedicated her 1931 book on the work of the "professor"—a year before Decroly's death—out of sympathy to the whole family.³¹ "There is perhaps no educator in the world," she writes, "who combines so much. Is it not unique that a scholar like Decroly, alongside all his scientific work, has been living and also training teachers for thirty years in the midst of backward and normal children?"³² As well as the "proverbial modesty" with which he was able to relativize his own contribution, this description of his life was presumably whispered into the ear of the Dutch reform pedagogue—actually a Montessorian—³³ by Mrs. Decroly. Paraphrasing her, Siewertsz confirmed

²⁷Leenders, *Montessori im faschistischen Italien*.

²⁸Amélie Hamaïde, *La méthode Decroly* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1922).

²⁹Introduction by Edouard Claparède in *Ibid.*, X. Carlo Trombetta, *Edouard Claparède. La famiglia, L'infanzia, Gli studi, Bibliografia* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1976) cites several times the bond of friendship that presumably existed between Decroly and Claparède but also points to the few book reviews that the latter devoted to his Brussels friend. Did Claparède thus want to spare his friend? Or did he leave critical observations on Decroly's work to others? There is no definite answer to this but it is certain that little correspondence with Decroly is preserved in the Claparède's impressive body of correspondence at the University Library of Geneva.

³⁰Hamaïde, *La méthode Decroly*, 3.

³¹Cornelia Philippi-Siewertsz van Reesema, *Uit en over de werken van Prof. Dr. Ovide Decroly* (Groningen/ Den Haag/ Batavia: Wolters, 1931), 3.

³²*Ibid.*, 5.

³³Elly Singer, "C. Philippi-Siewertsz van Reesema (1880-1963) pionierster op het gebied van de kinderstudies en kleuteronderwijs," in *Vrouwelijke pedagogen in Nederland* eds. Mineke Van Essen and Mieke Lunenberg (Nijkerk: Intro, 1991), 106-116; Schwegman, *Maria Montessori 1870-1952*; Leenders, *Montessori im faschistischen Italien*.

that “he is not one of these innovators who believe they have found the single, perfect formula that would put an end to progress.”³⁴ At the same time, she focused attention on the role “Madame” had played in his life. It was, when all is said and done, with her support (and with her money, but that is not mentioned) that Decroly, “too much a researcher to start an ordinary practice as a doctor,” “took abnormal children into their home.” In addition, she helped him with the observations and studies he made in this clinical “laboratory” to which “normal” orphans very soon also came and for which Julia Degand and Eugénie Monchamp were assistants from the very outset.

The third author, René Jadot, commemorated his father-in-law in several ways. As editor-in-chief of the *Nos écoles à l'oeuvre*, he wrote and published an extensive memorial in October 1932. The issue opened with Decroly's famous statement: “Vivre c'est donner, non recevoir. C'est le travail qui est la joie, non le salaire.”³⁵ In January 1933, Jadot participated in a “Hommage de la Science française.”³⁶ In his lecture he mentioned a number of things about Decroly's childhood and youth based on information from his mother-in-law. In her biography of her husband, she in turn included a good part of Jadot's article.

The Commemorative Book of 1933

With Decroly's relatively early death on 12 September 1932—he was just sixty-one at the time—the qualities his first biographies ascribed to him suddenly acquired much more gloss. Chance would have it that “one” had just set up a committee to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of the “master” (23 July 1931) as well as the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Ecole de l'Ermitage* (1932) with the publication of a commemorative book.³⁷ From the outset, this posthumously published work had the air of a book of condolences. The former teacher and inspector Jozef Emiel Verheyen, who was responsible for establishing academic pedagogy at the University of Ghent,³⁸

³⁴Philippi-Siewertsz van Reesema, *Uit en over de werken*, 5–6.

³⁵René Jadot, “Nos écoles à l'oeuvre,” *Bulletin mensuel des oeuvres scolaires d'Angleur* VI/3 (October 1932): 1–2.

³⁶Idem, “L'enfance de Decroly et la Pensée du Maître,” *Bulletin de la Société française de pédagogie* VI/6 (1933): 1–2. Also *La Vie Pédagogique*, the supplement of *l'Etincelle*, published this article in this same year.

³⁷The committee consisted of G. Boon, L. Dahlem, F. Dubois, A. Hamaïde, J.E. Verheyen, N. Smelten and L. Poirinot. See “Aux lecteurs,” in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly* (Saint-Nicolas-W.: Scheerders-Van Kerckhove, [1933]), 5.

³⁸Marc Depaepe, Kristof Dams, and Frank Simon, “‘La vie et l'école’. Analyse du discours rénovateur de Joseph Emile Verheyen,” *Bildungsforschung und Bildungspraxis/ Education et Recherche/ Educazione e ricerca. Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft/ Revue suisse des sciences de l'éducation/ Rivista svizzera di scienze dell'educazione*, XXI/1 (1999): 9–32; Marc Depaepe, “Experimentelle Pädagogik, Reformpädagogik und pädagogische Praxis. Überlegungen über ihre wechselseitigen Beziehungen, dargestellt am Beispiel der Versuchsschulen

opened all the registers of praise in the introduction: "In dedicating this book to Dr. Decroly, the authors wished to pay homage to this good, humanitarian man, pioneer of the New School and eminent scholar, whose noble life and remarkable work honor science in general and the science of the child in particular."³⁹ It was intended to bear witness to a "noble character" who, with a "good heart" and "exceptional intelligence," had produced a "titanic" legacy: as a man of action—"an educational artist" as well as a man of science—he strove until his final hour for the improvement of man and society.

Amélie Hamaïde,⁴⁰ who—thanks to the information from "Madame Decroly," her indefatigable companion in the battle for better education—returned to the biographical to provide insight into Decroly's work. In her commemorative book, she referred again to the influence of his father and mother and the deplorable nature of secondary education of the time, which had thoroughly bored him with such things as the uninspiring classes in Greek and Latin, the crown jewels of the traditional humanities. "His tastes pushed him above all towards the natural sciences, towards observation, experimentation and exploration of unknown countries. Robinson Crusoe [just like Rousseau's Emile!] and Meene Reed were his books of choice for light reading."⁴¹ Nature interested him and he enjoyed leaning over to look at the simple and modest little flowers alongside footpaths. He picked them and dried them in his notebooks [another striking allusion to Rousseau's long-term hobby]. Chemistry for him represented the only place where he could play Robinson."

These references to Rousseau make plausible what we have already noted about the possible role of such a pedagogized biography in the theory formation of New Education. Allegories of the brilliant lad who taught himself in his father's garden and gave full rein to his creativity, thanks to the music of his mother, but whose passion for knowledge and science was in danger of being smothered by ossified education. "Fortunately" some

von Jozef Emiel Verheyen in Zaventem und Gent (1923–1940)," in *Die neue Erziehung* eds. Oelkers and Osterwalder, 183–205; Marc Depaeppe and Angelo Van Gorp, "From paedology to experimental pedagogy. Evolution of the criteria for a 'scientific' educational research in Belgium before World War II on the basis of the works of Medard Schuyten (Antwerp), Ovide Decroly (Brussels), Jozef Verheyen (Ghent) and Raymond Buyse (Louvain)," in *Philosophy and history of the discipline of education. Evaluation and evolution of the criteria for educational research (Research Community Fund of Scientific Research—Vlaanderen, Leuven 18–20 October 2000)* eds. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaeppe (Louvain: Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, 2000), 17–30.

³⁹Jozef E. Verheyen, "La noble figure du Dr. Decroly, psychologue de l'enfant, pédagogue de la vie," in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly*, 9.

⁴⁰Amélie Hamaïde, "Ovide Decroly," in *ibid.*, 17–24.

⁴¹With this, the young Decroly is placed in a tradition of 'Robinsonades', for which Daniel Defoe's famous book served as metaphor. See Reinhard Stach, *Robinson und Robinsonaden* (Magdeburg: Literaturhaus, 2001), 82.

“good” teachers, in line with the much-used image in the New Education, encouraged his talent through self-study and laboratory work and allowed him to develop, so that even this scientist, partly on the basis of his negative experiences of school, himself tackled the improvement of education.⁴² Would it be going too far to recognize in the role of these exceptionally good teachers the need for education? Indeed, Decroly and his followers never questioned the school in itself (what had to be achieved was a “new” school better adapted to life).

We would even go a step further by discerning additional symbolism in Hamaïde’s biographical story line. In our view, it is not by chance that in the course of his career, Decroly, like Christ on the way to Calvary, fell three times under the burden of the cross. The comparison is, in spite of—or precisely because of—the liberalism and Freemasonry of Decroly and his environment,⁴³ much more than a rhetorical figure. Moreover, interesting consideration could be given to the parallel symbolism of Masonry and the Judeo-Christian tradition, but we will not go into that here as what we are primarily concerned with is the sanctification of Decroly in the discourse of reform pedagogy.

After a difficult start in the atheneum of Tournai and Mechelen—there are even letters dated 10 November 1885 and 21 January 1886 in which his mother and father, respectively, threaten to withdraw him from school⁴⁴—he eventually became a laureate in the “general competition” of the atheneum. Nevertheless, things threatened to go amiss again at the University of Ghent, where he went to study medicine in 1889 (starting the first year in natural sciences). “He came close to disaster,” says Hamaïde, but thanks to “good” friends (including his future brother-in-law) and professors rescue was at hand. Decroly completed his university education in 1896 as laureate of the traveling scholarship competition, and in 1897 he also won the “university competition” with his thesis, which in 1897-1898 provided him with opportunities to specialize in Berlin and Paris.⁴⁵ From the latter city he wrote, according to what Madame told Hamaïde, a letter to his fiancée, much quoted afterwards, in which he explained that the study of “nervous diseases” could only be a step up to what really interested him—the study of the pathological and the normal child.

⁴²Oelkers, *Reformpädagogik. Eine kritische Dogmengeschichte*. See also Caruso, “¿Una Nave sin Puerto Definitivo?”

⁴³Paul Halens, “A l’est de l’Ermitage. La libre pensée dans la pédagogie decrolyenne,” *Paedagogica Historica* XXXII/1 (1996): 51-83.

⁴⁴Gustaaf Keppens, “Ovide Decroly, psycholoog van het gehandicapte en van het normale kind,” *Christene School. Pedagogische Periodiek* 79/15 (May 1972): 235; in which there is mention of a letter from his father. This is, indeed, the case! Decroly received a letter from him on 21 January 1886. Shortly before, however, his mother also wrote a letter (10 November 1885), in which one can already read that her son urgently had to change his attitude if he did not want to endanger his plans for the future—medical studies at the university.

⁴⁵Hamaïde, “Ovide Decroly,” 18-19.

For the first time, Hamaïde also mentioned finances because there was no money at all for the establishment of an institution for "the deficient children of the bourgeois class," an initiative for which medical colleagues in Brussels, including Dr. Demoor, appeared to be pressing: "No-one could provide him with money," was the conclusion. But fortunately there came the intervention of Madame Decroly who, together with her husband, decided to turn their house into a "huge laboratory" "in direct contact with deficient children. This was the birth of the first psychological laboratory in Belgium,"⁴⁶ again according to Hamaïde, a claim that historically can easily be contested.⁴⁷ However, far more important than the question of priority here are the hagiographical opportunities such financial sacrifice opened for Decroly's biographers—an effort which in 1927, as the *Ecole de l'Ermitage* for "normal" children moved to Avenue Montana in Uccle, had to be repeated: "It was he and Madame Decroly, in 1927, at the time of the transfer of the little *Ecole de l'Ermitage* near the forest, who provided the first significant funds. This generous and selfless movement created such joy among the parents that immediately capital flowed in and the new school was purchased." It was only a small step from this selfless financial sacrifice to the claim of almost complete altruism: "And afterwards, Dr. Decroly certainly did not lead a simple and easy life full of comfort. He paid for it at this time with unsteady health and enforced rest. Everything apart from work was lost time. He ran from one place to another. . . . [H]e made do with eating a morsel of bread on the run, always on the run!"⁴⁸ The ever-working Decroly became the model of boundless effort for others: "His goodness, his indulgence, his desire to do good attracted everyone. Truth and sincerity were at the bottom of everything he did in his life. . . . He is the spirit who causes everyone to vibrate."

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷In 1894, that is, almost immediately after his appointment at the Louvain university, Armand Thiéry received the opportunity to start a Laboratory for Experimental Psychology. This was the first of its kind in Belgium, and it was developed on the model of the institute that Wundt had set up in Leipzig and where Thiéry had studied. Already under J.F. Heymans, the Ghent professor who, while waiting for Thiéry to complete his training, was assigned to teach, a laboratory for experimental psychology would have started but without any room assigned to it. See Maurits Smeyers, *Armand Thiéry (Gentbrugge, 1868-Leuven, 1955). Apologie voor een geniaal zonderling* (Louvain: De vrienden van de Leuvense Stedelijke Musea, 1992), 19 [= *Arca Lovaniensis. Artes Atque Historiae. Reserans Documenta* 19-20 (1990-1991)]. Decroly himself apparently distinguished between the *Institut* and the laboratory, as appears from Ovide Decroly, *La Psychologie de l'Enfant en Belgique. Extrait de la Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles Avril-Mai 1908* (Liège: La Meuse, 1908), 690. The private laboratory was, as he stated, only attached to the *Institut* in 1902 to serve the abnormal children of the Policlinic. The *Institut* was intended for the hardly representative group of abnormal and normal children from the well-off class (particularly, and this certainly at the beginning, children of acquaintances and colleagues), while Decroly needed for his research a large group of subjects from the working class, which he thus found in the Policlinic as well as in the working-class educational system of the city of Brussels, where, also in 1902, he was appointed *médecin-inspecteur*.

⁴⁸Hamaïde, "Ovide Decroly," 21.

At the end of her article, Hamaïde herself conjured up a real “miracle”: this dauntless and unceasing effort—so the story goes—undermined Decroly’s health and he contracted heart disease in 1930. Jeanne, the eldest daughter, “who inherited from her father an interest in babies” had taken home with her an orphan from the maternity clinic where she worked: “And it was “Bébé” who worked the miracle.” What happened? At the first spontaneous glance, “Bébé” laughed at Decroly and the two of them as if self-evidently became good mates, walking, relaxing, and talking about plants, birds, insects and so on. “Dr. Decroly was saved by this little creature who gave him back his desire to live. Is this not a fine story, this true story, and does it not depict the great scholar?” Hamaïde exclaimed: “What a fortunate little being to have found such an environment! What a fortunate scholar to find his joy and desire for life in a very small child!”⁴⁹

Continuing this line of reasoning, Hamaïde could just as well have written “saint” instead of “scholar.” Christ, in the final analysis, was also the child’s ideal friend. But let us leave that speculation for the time being and look at what others contributed to the religious symbolism in the *Hommage*. The Brussels head teacher Louis Dalhem published a piece that, judging from the title, left little to imagination: “Ecce Homo!” Dalhem wanted to evoke the great, maternal (!) heart of Decroly.⁵⁰ The author knew him as a gifted teacher, a diligent worker who despised fashionable living and only allowed himself relaxation in the music of Beethoven: “This man was all humanity. Those humble in spirit, weak in fortune, attracted him. . . . Love of childhood, unhappy childhood, enriched his educational work.” Was it not a child who had given him back his strength to live? “Knowledge and kindness: the two aspects of his work. Money? No concern.” Altruism mattered to Decroly. And to bring the comparison with Christ even closer, again reference was made to his quotation: “Living means *giving*, not receiving.” The “Ecce Homo” went on to depict a suffering Christ: “He suffered without complaining, but let men speak. He practiced good for the love of good itself. He relieved the poor. . . ; he did good, he practiced justice, he thought with uprightness. That is the man.”

Fernand Dubois had something to add. This inspector and editor of *Vers l'école active*, the New Education forum of francophone primary education in Belgium that devoted a great deal of attention to the work of Decroly and to his death when he died,⁵¹ found not only that his friend “the

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁰Louis Dalhem, “Ecce Homo !” in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly*, 28-29.

⁵¹The issue of *Vers l'école active* X/2 (November 1932) was devoted to Decroly and contained an article written in superlatives by Dubois (pp. 20-27). In it, he stated that “One has said, for example, that Decroly did not write much. Very wrong! Decroly’s written work is enormous, dispersed in many articles, brochures, books, printed lectures.” (p. 20). With this, he seems to be acting against opinions like those of Ferrière, who argued that Decroly was

educationalist of interest" had constantly ignored his own health and life,⁵² but also that he was a great poet able to unite Real Life with Humanity:

Communicating with the whole chain of ancestors through the outstretched arms of this little girl, the offspring of unknown parents, as if fallen down from heaven, and who divinely calls you: "Papa!" What poet, what idealistic singer would dare to dream of such a kiss from man to mankind, from history and future to the wise man who sacrificed himself for them, who has merged with them? . . . To find God in these few kilograms of human life and thinking, to glimpse that the serenity one tastes will in spite of everything serve one day to calm the waves, the turmoil of stupidity and grudges: find me a better source of poetic enjoyment and exaltation.

As if this were not enough, DuBois emphasized the analogy of the sacrament of the Eucharist, of "communion" with humanity, literally using the words of the consecration from the Catholic mass: "This is my flesh, this is my blood," words that, although they did not come from him, are nevertheless words with which he, as a detached seeker of the truth, averse to hypocrisy, was very familiar. Boundless admiration that, almost bordering on blasphemy, eventually returned to the foundation of the initial thesis: "Decroly, who is so patient, does he not dare to do, not like the educationalists, but like mothers and teach us to read in one go, in a single leap, without breaking it down, without scaling efforts? And the maternal miracle becomes the school miracle. We read and write meaningful things straightaway, as we spoke about happy and surprising things by looking at and listening to the lips of mothers. . . . Decroly, I repeat, received the kiss of the Muses and his glory will be sung through the ages."⁵³

In this way Decroly's "canonization" as an educational innovator appeared to be a fact. The "true master," as the same author emphasized in *Vers l'école* active in the year of Decroly's death, had entered the realm of legend for good.⁵⁴ However, sainthood and mythologization went hand in hand. Because it was said there that Decroly, who had collapsed in the garden of his institute while removing a withered branch, had left behind on his writing desk, as a kind of spiritual will, the following: "It is a great joy for someone who has pursued a goal for more than a quarter of a century and who feels that the moment of departure to eternal rest will soon arrive to see that his efforts have not been in vain and that even if he will

better known by the books written about him than by his own publications: "The pen was only a tool for him, and he rarely had time to take it in hand to write a work or even an article." (p. 234).

⁵²Biographical information: Maurits De Vroede et al., *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van het pedagogisch leven in België in de 19^e en 20^e eeuw. Deel IV: De Periodieken 1914-1918 Eerste Stuk* (Louvain: Universitaire Pers, 1987), 817; Fernand Dubois, "Mon grand ami," in *Homage au Dr. Decroly*, 37-38.

⁵³Dubois, "Mon grand ami," 46.

⁵⁴Idem, "Il est entré dans la légende".

no longer be, others will carry on. . . ."⁵⁵ It cannot be determined whether these prophetic words had been written down at this actual time or were placed there by his people in a "*mise en scène*" of perfect hagiography. Verheyen in the *Hommage* specified another subject—that of the elites⁵⁶—with which Decroly had been concerned just before his death.

Others compared Decroly to Christ. The Colombian Agustín Nieto Caballero (1889-1975) did so literally in a letter of condolence to "Madame"⁵⁷ because the life of her husband had been permeated just as much by apostolic spirit and love of children—a topic that he addressed in the book of tributes with the appropriate superlatives. Decroly's generosity and intellectual honesty had to be compared with manna falling from Heaven. As "an illustrious member of that great family of minds [of innovators]," Decroly, according to Nieto, succeeded in achieving "a double miracle" in Colombia: first, as an educator he had left his own in order to go and preach the new education on a far continent, second his cosmopolitan adherents have acted upon it.⁵⁸ Adolphe Ferrière wrote in tribute: "One day I called him a 'secular saint.' Others since then have taken up the term."⁵⁹ The same expression appeared in an obituary a few weeks after Decroly's death in a Santander newspaper: "El santo laico, todo desinterés y amor a la infancia, moria, precisamente, en el templo donde tantas veces oficiara."⁶⁰

THE MYTH PRESERVED

Tributes in the 1930s

After the appearance of the commemorative book in 1933, ceremonies were held with clock-like precision over the years. Generally, anniversaries

⁵⁵These words originated in the already mentioned biography by Mrs. Decroly and were cited by, among others, Fernand Dubois, "La vraie figure du maître," *Vers l'Ecole active* 14 (November 1932): 25; Angela Medici, *L'Education nouvelle. Ses fondateurs. Son évolution* (Paris: Alcan/ PUF, 1940), 244; Renaat Merecy, *Historische Pedagogiek. Schets van ideeën en werkelijkheden. Hellas tot heden* (Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1966), 151; Jean-Marie Besse, *Ovide Decroly, psychologue et éducateur* (Toulouse: Privat, 1982), 60 [= *Grands éducateurs* 1].

⁵⁶With this he referred to "Les changements de la vie sociale. L'école unique et la préparation de l'élite. Résumé de la communication de Mr. le Docteur Decroly," *Vers l'Ecole active* 12 (September 1932): 179-181. This summary was also included as an abstract in the *Compte-rendu complet* of the 6th *Congrès Mondial de la Ligue Internationale pour l'Education Nouvelle* (1932).

⁵⁷Agustín Nieto Caballero to Madame Decroly, September 1932, *Lettres Adressées à Madame Decroly*, Uccle: C.E.D. Nieto Caballero wrote seven letters to Mrs. Decroly between 1932 and 1937.

⁵⁸Agustín Nieto Caballero, "El Doctor Decroly en Colombia," in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly*, 97-104.

⁵⁹Adolphe Ferrière, "Necrologie Ovide Decroly," *Pour l'Ere Nouvelle* XI/81 (October 1932): 234.

⁶⁰"El Doctor Decroly," *El Cantabrico* (25 September 1932): 1. The special attention of the death was perhaps related to the presence of Julia Degand, who at that very time was giving a course on the "escuela activa" in the local normal school. The "own tempel" mentioned stood as a symbol for the garden in which Decroly died.

of his death or of the founding of the *Ermitage* were used to put the Master in the spotlight. Also in 1933, a "Manifestation Internationale à la mémoire du Docteur Ovide Decroly" was organized on the second of July in the *Palais des Académies* in Brussels.⁶¹ Jean Demoor, assisted by the organizing committee responsible for the commemorative book, presided over this celebration. Mrs. Decroly, with her children and other family members, attended as well as "an immense crowd," not unusual for a first official commemoration in Belgium. Several had already taken place in Europe and elsewhere in the world.⁶² An example of this was the similar French event that had been already held on 19 January, a "Hommage de la Science française à la mémoire du Dr. Decroly," at which practitioners (i.e., teachers, inspectors), as well as numerous theoreticians, were involved.⁶³ This commemoration, as reported in *Vers l'école active*, proved interesting primarily for the statement of Julia Degand that emphasized the role of Mrs. Decroly: "Then in the evening, when all the little world rested, we met to work together. Mrs. Decroly translated one of those many English books, a large American brochure telling of the efforts made in other countries on behalf of education that the Master had to know about as bibliography for comparing it with his, to cite them scrupulously in his work. . . . Doctor Decroly was often with us."⁶⁴

Another event took place in Ronse, Belgium, on 8 November 1936, a memorial ceremony in the city hall⁶⁵ with an exhibition about Decroly and a lecture by Dubois, who also projected the movie made by his daughter Suzanne on the *Ecole Decroly*. From 29 January to 5 February 1939, the city administration in La Louvière organized a "Semaine pédagogique Docteur Ovide Decroly" for teachers,⁶⁶ with, among other things, lectures by Degand, Hamaïde, Jadot, Gallien (directress of the *Ermitage*), and Boon. The movie by Suzanne was also shown. The *Comité d'Initiatives pour la Réno-*

⁶¹Andréa Jadoulle, "Manifestation Internationale à la mémoire du Docteur Ovide Decroly au Palais des Académies à Bruxelles," *Nos Ecoles à l'oeuvre. Bulletin mensuel des oeuvres scolaires d'Angleur* VI/10 (1933): 1-3.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 1.

⁶³Idem, "Hommage de la Science française à la mémoire du Dr. Decroly," *Nos Ecoles à l'oeuvre. Bulletin mensuel des oeuvres scolaires d'Angleur* VI/6 (1933): 1-2. The date of the session was mentioned in the lecture of Henri Wallon, published in the *Bulletin de la Société française de pédagogie* 47 (March 1933): 2-5. The celebration was organized by the following associations: the *Association française pour l'avancement des sciences*, the *Association générale des Institutrices des Ecoles maternelles*, the *Cercle Universitaire International*, the *Groupe français d'Education nouvelle*, the *Groupe des Inspectrices des Ecoles maternelles*, the *Société française de pédagogie* and the *Syndicat national des Instituteurs*.

⁶⁴Julia Degand, "Les débuts," *Vers l'école active* X/12 (September 1933): 183-185. The article was written on 26 February 1933.

⁶⁵There is a folder about this commemoration that has been preserved in the 'scrap-book' *Hommage au Dr. Decroly après 1932* (Uccle: C.E.D.).

⁶⁶"La semaine pédagogique Docteur Ovide Decroly," *La Revue pédagogique* XIV/4 (January 1939): 53-54.

vation de l'Enseignement en Belgique (CIREB), whose foundation was laid by sympathizers of the Decroly school immediately after the Second World War organized a Decroly congress in September 1945 at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*; another followed in December on innovation in education. Decroly became the springboard for more large-scale modernization projects in the postwar period.⁶⁷

New Commemorative Books from the 1950s to the 1980s

In addition, new books of tribute were regularly published in which the hand of the guardians of Decroly's heritage can be clearly discerned. Twenty years after his death, "les Amis de l'Ecole Decroly" held a "solemn session" in the Palace of Fine Arts and the Residence Palace in Brussels. A representative of the Queen, the chairman of the liberal *Ligue de l'enseignement* to which Decroly had belonged, foreign guests, senior civil servants, and the Minister of Public Education, the Catholic Pierre Harmel paid tribute to the Master and the "miraculous revelation in relation to the 'new pedagogy' with which he had made Brussels world-famous."⁶⁸ Verheyen spoke again, not just praising the Master as a "paragon of scientific modesty and great human humility" but also comparing him with his great predecessor Pestalozzi. The maxim "*Everything for others. Nothing for oneself*" also applied to Decroly, a conclusion which Verheyen had reached with the following reasoning: "He had the soul of an apostle and the courage and will-power of a hero, tirelessly fighting for a better humanity. His love knew no limitation and no rest; it was gift, dedication and also sacrifice. . . . In this love there lies, in my modest opinion, the main constituent of the message which he has left us. . . . May it, in the words of the Bible from the Parable of the Sower, be preserved: *And another part of the seed fell on good soil and produced fruit, a hundredfold.*"⁶⁹ Hamaïde and Degand also climbed into the pulpit to sing the praise of the "benefactor of humanity."⁷⁰ Degand—who explicitly included Madame in the tribute:

⁶⁷See *Congrès Decroly. Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2-3-4 septembre 1945* (Liège: Thone, n.d.), 169. See also Olaf Moens, Frank Simon, and Jeffrey Tyssens, "De dag van de opvoeders is nu op komst": onderwijshervormingsvoorstellen rond de Tweede Wereldoorlog," in *De Tweede Wereldoorlog als factor in de onderwijsgeschiedenis/ La Seconde Guerre mondiale, une étape dans l'histoire de l'enseignement* eds. Marc Depaepe and Dirk Martin (Brussels: Navorsings- en Studiecentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog/ Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes historiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, 1997), 41.

⁶⁸"Een woord vooraf," in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly. Huldebetoen aan Dr. Decroly*, 7. The event of 23 November was followed by "des journées pédagogiques" on the two following days. In the student paper of the *Ermitage* there also appeared a report of this event by a student at which also a production "par la vie, pour la vie" was given by the students. See *Le courrier de l'école XXIX/2* (December 1952): 2-3.

⁶⁹Verheyen, "Allocution—Toespraak," 25.

⁷⁰Amélie Hamaïde, "L'influence du Dr. Decroly se fait sentir dans le monde entier," in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly. Huldebetoen aan Dr. Decroly*, 44.

"it was she who received me and spoke to me with enthusiasm about the irregular children"—even went so far as to say that the Binet-Simon Scale in the United States had become known through Decroly, who was said to have informed Goddard about it in 1908 in Brussels.⁷¹ Whoever examines the sources carefully will note that, in this period, while contacts between Decroly and Goddard existed, we may presume that his entourage exaggerated Decroly's role in the testing movement.⁷²

On 15 March 1953, the *Comité national belge de the Organization Mondiale pour l'Education Présoilaire* (OMEP) organized a *Journée internationale "Decroly"*.⁷³ The publication contained a speech by Valérie Decordes that offered a provocative one liner: "To meet Decroly was a bit like a second birth, the birth to conscious life."⁷⁴ It also included speeches by Bovet, Auguste Ley,⁷⁵ Degand, Monchamp, Hamaïde, two former students (Dr. Jean Snoeck and Mrs. Morley-Gérard), and Jeunehomme and Roels (the authors of the 1936 curriculum for primary education in Belgium, partly inspired by Decroly's ideas). In 1958, the *Ligue belge d'hygiène mentale* organized a commemoration during the world exhibition in the Brabant pavilion in Brussels.⁷⁶ Under the chairmanship of J.E. Segers, Segers, Jeanne Jadot-Decroly (Decroly's eldest daughter), Lucie Libois (the then directress of the *Ermitage*), and A. Van Goidsenhoven (the director of the provincial institute for deaf mutes and the blind in St.-Agatha-Berchem) gave lectures. The bibliography of Decroly's work, published with the help of Valérie Decordes in 1964 on the initiative of Marion Coulon by the Min-

⁷¹Julia Degand, "Les débuts de l'Institut d'Enseignement Spécial," in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly. Huldebetoen aan Dr. Decroly*, 39. See also James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind. A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 157.

⁷²With some good will, we can indeed ascribe to Decroly a role, albeit minor, in the triumphal march of the test across the United States, but this contribution may certainly not be exaggerated nor, for that matter, can that of Goddard himself. According to the literature (for example Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000], 134), which, perhaps, has placed too much emphasis on the self-discourse of the Stanford revision, this was in no way comparable to the contribution of Terman. In 1922 Decroly, together with his assistant Raymond Buyse, made a trip to the United States in order to meet the most important American actors in the testing movement. On their journey they met e.g. Goddard and Terman. That they themselves looked up to the "famous" Goddard appears from the notes that Buyse maintained on this journey: Raymond Buyse, 1922, Archives of the professors, K.U.Leuven Central Library.

⁷³Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Présoilaire. Comité national belge, *Journée internationale "Decroly" (1871-1932), 15 mars 1953* (Brussels: O.M.E.P., [1953]), 24.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 2. This speech was given on the eve of the festivities at a visit to the school.

⁷⁵Ley, too, did not fail to participate in the commemorations of Decroly shortly after his death: Auguste Ley, "Le Docteur Decroly," *Journal de Neurologie et de Psychiatrie XXXII*/9 (September 1932): 711-712.

⁷⁶*Demi-Journées d'études. Bruxelles-Exposition. 6 October 1958. "Hommage au Docteur Decroly"* (Brussels: Ligue belge d'hygiène mentale, 1958), 34.

istry of National Education and Culture, can also be considered a tribute.⁷⁷ In the early 1970s, moreover, a few events marked the centenary of Decroly's birth. The *Ligue mondiale de l'éducation*, arranged the first commemoration which met from 17-21 August 1971 in Brussels on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. The first plenary session focused attention not only to the association's birthday but also on Decroly himself. In 1972, the University of Mons hosted a meeting in memory of Decroly entitled "La pensée du Docteur Decroly et l'Ecole d'aujourd'hui."⁷⁸

Other commemorative books appeared in 1971⁷⁹ and in 1981.⁸⁰ The "école Decroly" published the former; the "Amicale" of state education in Ronse, where a statue had also been erected, published the latter. The liberal Minister of Postal Services, who was from the same region, contributed a suitable forward and issued a new stamp for the occasion—the idyll of the garden with aviary, rocks, caves, all kinds of exotic plants, a workshop, a rabbit hutch, and a chicken coop, proved suspiciously reminiscent of a Decroly school. We go on to read about Decroly's less gifted brother, Raphaël, "whose character was affected by the after-effects of meningitis" which, it is said, influenced Ovide's choice of study. The 1980s also contributed its share to the maintenance of the image around Decroly. In 1983, two memorials took place: a colloquium in Lyon and the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the *Ermitage*. The death of Decroly, a good fifty years previously, was commemorated in Lyon with lectures by Avanzini, Besse, F. Dubreucq-Choprix and others. The *Université Lyon 2*, in collaboration with the *Société A. Binet et Th. Simon*, sponsored that event. The involvement of that association ultimately led to a special issue of *Le Binet Simon*.⁸¹ The celebration in the *Ermitage* took the form of an open house. On this occasion, the students reflected on the theme "Pour la vie, par la vie" and on the global method.⁸² In 1984, Decroly's

⁷⁷Marion Coulon, *Hommage à/ Hulde aan Ovide Decroly. Bibliographie de son œuvre/ Bibliografie van zijn werk* (Brussels: Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Culture/ Ministerie van Nationale Opvoeding en Cultuur, January 1964), 48.

⁷⁸*Séance à la mémoire de Decroly: La pensée du Docteur Decroly et l'Ecole d'aujourd'hui* (Mons: Université de Mons Département de Documentation didactique et de pédagogie comparée, 31 May 1972). 8 November an exhibition "Decroly et l'éducation nouvelle" was inaugurated at the I.N.R.P., rue d'Ulm, in Paris. See *Anniversaires* (Uccle: C.E.D., 1932-).

⁷⁹*Le Docteur Decroly et l'éducation* (Brussels: Ecole Decroly, 1971), 68.

⁸⁰*Dr. Ovide Decroly. Hommage à l'occasion du 110^e anniversaire de sa naissance de Decroly* (Ronse: Amicale Rijksbasisonderwijs, 1981), 192.

⁸¹Marie-Louise Van Herreweghe, "Decroly aujourd'hui: éducation et psychologie," "Decroly: un modèle d'école?" *Le Binet Simon. Bulletin de la Société Alfred Binet et Théodore Simon*, XC/623 (1990), 4-5.

⁸²The "Journées Portes ouvertes" took place on 30 and 31 March 1983. The work of the students was reflected in a special brochure: *1907-1982. L'école de l'Ermitage "Pour la vie, par la vie" a 75 ans* (April 1983).

town of birth issued two more commemorative brochures.⁸³ One was published on the occasion of an exhibition on Decroly, the other on the occasion of the "public education" day at which not only the Minister of Education and six of his predecessors spoke but also the royal interest in Decroly pedagogy manifested itself. Still other occasional publications came from the house which, more than once, commissioned educational authorities from Belgium and abroad.⁸⁴ The fact that over the years children's stories appear on the wonderful life of Ovide in the pupil magazines of the Decroly school may be regarded as more than symbolic. Continuing the imagery of our title, we can consider them as "prayer books" for children.⁸⁵

AN OBSTACLE TO MYTHOLOGIZATION?

Was there really no barrier to stand in the way of this mythologization? We will try to answer that question by means of two examples of possible opposition.

Rivalry in Catholic Belgium?

Any outsider who wanted to write something meaningful about Decroly had either to turn to the family, friends, and close collaborators for further information⁸⁶ or make do with what those groups had already put on paper. To demonstrate this, a whole series of more or less popularized residues of the picture outlined above can be reviewed—a genealogy of the positive appreciation of Decroly outside of science could doubtless be constructed—but such an in-depth analysis would go beyond the scope of the present article, all the more so as it could not be limited to the biographical aspect but should take account just as much of that which lies within science. By way of example, we mention in passing that the discourse focusing on Decroly easily became rooted in Flanders as the core of the ideologically neutral public pedagogy.⁸⁷ At the University of Ghent, this tradition can be

⁸³Dr. Ovide Decroly (1871-1932). *Toespraak gehouden te Ronse in 1904. Tekst van de onuitgegeven redevoering. Uitgegeven door het Departement Onderwijs van de Stad Gent n.a.v. de tentoonstelling Dr. O. Decroly in het Onthaalcentrum "De Coorenblomme", van 24 februari tot 11 maart 1984* (Gent: Departement Onderwijs van de Stad Gent, 1984), 64; Walter Kerckhove, *Om en bij Dr. Ovide Decroly. À propos du Dr. Ovide Decroly et de son œuvre* (Ronse: AZ, 1984), 256.

⁸⁴For example *Documents pédagogiques Ecole Decroly* 22, with contributions from G. Delandsheere, F. Dubreucq-Choppix and G. Mialaret.

⁸⁵The pupil newspaper *Le courrier de l'école*, for example, devoted a special issue to Decroly in December 1947 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the *Ermitage*. From a survey included in it, it appeared that the pupils knew little about the founder of their school. The cover shows Decroly standing in the midst of children with his arms slightly open: a true Christ figure, under the motto "let the children come unto me".

⁸⁶For example Besse, *Ovide Decroly*. See also Valdi José Bassan, *Comment intéresser l'enfant à l'école. La notion des centres d'intérêt chez Decroly* (Paris: PUF, 1976).

⁸⁷Jean Van Buggenhout, *Enkele aspecten van de pedagogiek in verband met de Vlaamse openbare lagere school periode 1919-1940* (Gent: R.U.G., 1961), 169 [= *Bijdragen tot de Pedagogiek* 5].

traced through the works of Verheyen,⁸⁸ Plancke,⁸⁹ Keppens⁹⁰ (in whom we can read on the basis of Verheyen, for example, that a “devout hand” in the room where Decroly’s body lay had written words of thanks for his boundless love of children), De Block,⁹¹ Wens,⁹² De Clerck,⁹³ Van Herreweghe⁹⁴ and so on. On the Catholic side, however, the perpetuation of this image proved less smooth, partly due to the normative and ideological import of the theory of education propagated in it. The “materialism” or “positivism” ascribed to his notions⁹⁵ could only be offset by opening them to the religious experience of life by means of the metaphysical test of Christian philosophy.⁹⁶ It is notable that an impulse for this came not so much from Belgium, let alone from Flanders, but from Switzerland—by the later Monsignor Eugène Dévaud,⁹⁷ who also contributed to the tribute book.⁹⁸ The

⁸⁸Verheyen, “La noble figure du Dr. Decroly,” 9-14; Idem, “Ovide Decroly,” in *Paedagogische Encyclopaedie* eds. Verheyen and Casimir, 329-334.

⁸⁹Robert L. Plancke, “Ovide Decroly (1871-1932),” in *Les grands pédagogues* ed. Jean Château (Paris: PUF, 1961), 261-273.

⁹⁰Keppens, “Ovide Decroly.”

⁹¹Alfred De Block, “Decroly, Ovide,” in *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek* eds. Jozef Duverger et al. (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1964), 1: 394-398; Alfred De Block and Luk Martens, *Moderne schoolsystemen* (Antwerp: Standaard Educatieve Uitgeverij, 1983), 57-71. The biographical sketch contains many inaccuracies. The *Institut de l’Enseignement Spécial*, for example, is situated on the *Vossegatstraat* when it was founded (while it was originally on the *rue de la Vanne*) and Decroly is given as chairman of the International Congress for Pedagogy in 1911, while it should have been Pedology. In short, classic errors.

⁹²Maria Wens, the secretary of the Flemish section of the *Ligue internationale pour l’éducation nouvelle* in the 1950s, who was also associated with the State University of Ghent, gave, in the latter capacity, a lecture on “The role of Decroly in the research into and the treatment of the emotionally disturbed child” on the occasion of a Decroly exhibition at the University of Ghent (Library of the Seminars for Historical and Comparative Pedagogy, 26 November—3 December 1972).

⁹³Karel De Clerck, “Ovide Decroly en de Gentse Universiteit,” *Een groot opvoeder. De psycho-pedagoog Ovide Decroly. Un grand éducateur. Le psycho-pédagogue Ovide Decroly* (Ronse: Vriendenkring Rijksbasisonderwijs avec section française, 1981), 49-51.

⁹⁴Van Herreweghe, “Decroly aujourd’hui: éducation et psychologie.”

⁹⁵See, for example, Victor D’Espallier, “Decroly, Ovide,” in *De Katholieke Encyclopaedie van Opvoeding en Onderwijs* eds. Victor D’Espallier et al. (’s Gravenhage/Antwerp: Pax/t Groeit, 1951), 1: 436-441; Sigebertus Rombouts, *Historiese Paedagogiek. Grote lijnen der geschiedenis van het opvoedkundig denken en doen in doorlopend verband met de kultuurontwikkeling* (Tilburg/Amsterdam/Antwerp: R.K. Jongensweeshuis/R.K. Boekcentrale/N.V. Veritas, 1928), 3: 262-278; Cyriel De Keyser, *Inleiding in de geschiedenis van het Westerse vormingswezen*, 5th ed. (Antwerp: Plantyn, 1969), 377-379; R. Windey, K. De Preter, and M. Pelgrims, *Geschiedenis van opvoeding en vorming met bloemlezing*, 4th ed. (Antwerp: Plantyn, 1965), 185-186.

⁹⁶Marc Depaepe, Maurits De Vroede, and Frank Simon, “Tussen wens en werkelijkheid: het verhaal van de onderwijsvernieuwing uit 1936,” *Christene School. Pedagogische Periodiek* 100 (November 1993): 329.

⁹⁷Eugène Dévaud, *Le système Decroly et la pédagogie chrétienne* (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Université, 1936), 84; Julien Melon and Eugène Dévaud, *Une nouvelle visite à l’école active de... mon rêve: une centre d’intérêt à base grammaticale* (Tamina: Duculot-Roulin, 1932), 145; Marie-Thérèse Weber, *La pédagogie Fribourgeoise, du Concile de Trente à Vatican II. Continuité ou discontinuité?* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 156-162.

⁹⁸Eugène Dévaud, “Feuilles détachées de mon carnet de route,” in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly*, 69-77.

question remains, however, whether this explains sufficiently why, in what we have called "lower" pedagogy,⁹⁹ fervent advocates of Decroly's methods can be found on the Catholic side,¹⁰⁰ not least among the Christian Brothers.¹⁰¹ In "higher" pedagogy, a dichotomy may well be established between "neutral" and "Catholic," although such a dividing line has certainly not always been an ideological rift. For example, Raymond Buyse (1889-1974), at the Catholic University of Leuven, who although Catholic, wanted to promote the scientific character of educational science principally by empirical means. Moreover, various Ghent defenders of Decroly, including Kepkens and Van Herreweghe, mentioned earlier, were themselves Catholics.

In sum, the reception of Decroly as well as his canonization relies heavily on the background of the researchers and the biographers who have transmitted the "story." Professor Buyse of Leuven offers an interesting starting point in connection with a possible ideological point of conflict. It is remarkable in any case that a first-rank research assistant like Buyse, with whom Decroly went on a five-month study trip to the United States in 1922¹⁰² and who rendered him various scientific services, particularly in statistics,¹⁰³ was not even mentioned in the 1933 *Hommage*. Was this a result of aversion on the part of the organizers to a representative of the Catholic university? Or did it have more to do with the ideological barrier that his appointment to the *Université libre de Bruxelles*, originally a bulwark of free-

⁹⁹Depaepe, *Order in Progress*.

¹⁰⁰Leo Roels, *Twintig Jaar Boeman* (Lier: Van In, 1967), 32-37; Valère Van Coppenolle, *De activiteit op school*.

¹⁰¹See the series *Hors des Sentiers Battus*, for example: Frère Léon, *Hors des Sentiers Battus. Essai de Méthodologie Nouvelle IV. Méthodologie spéciale*, vol. 3, *Contenant la méthodologie de l'enseignement de l'histoire, de l'écriture, de la seconde langue, du dessin, du chant et de la gymnastique* (Mont-Saint-Guibert: Frères Maristes, 1937), 111; in Dutch translation: Broeder Leon, *Nieuwe wegen op. Proeve van een nieuwe pedagogiek IV. Bijzondere methodiek*, vol. 3, *Bevattende het onderwijs in de vaderlandsche geschiedenis, het leeren schrijven, het onderwijs in de tweede taal, het tekenonderwijs, het zangonderwijs en de turnoefeningen* (Pittem: Broeders Maristen, 1937), 111. There also appeared other series on the so-called "new roads"; see, for example, Victor d'Espallier et al., *Nieuwe banen in het onderwijs*, 2d ed. (Antwerp/ Brussels/ Ghent/ Louvain: Standaard Boekhandel, 1937), 1: 382; Sigebertus Rombouts, *Nieuwe banen in de psychologie. Een wegwijzer voor studerende vooral voor hoofdakke-candidaten* (Tilburg: Drukkerij van het R.K. Jongensweeshuis, 1946), VIII, 237.

¹⁰²See the already cited manuscript that Buyse prepared on this journey. With this travel report is a map of the USA with the journey marked on it and a typed table with the dates, the duration of the visit in each city, the names of the institutes visited, the people met, the subjects discussed, and the list of the visits, courses, and experiments. According to this document, Buyse and Decroly were in the United States from 27 March through 2 July 1922.

¹⁰³Sylvain De Coster, "Decroly (Ovide-Jean)," in *Biographie Nationale*, vol. 18/10 (Brussels: L'Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1973), 134-144: "Although other researchers participated in the birth and the development of this discipline [quantitative pedagogy] included in the totality of the pedagogical sciences, one can consider Raymond Buyse, who then became professor at the *l'Université catholique de Louvain*, to be its true creator. But he had benefited from Decroly's vast knowledge and experience." (col. 141).

thinking, had made impossible? In the biographies of Buyse—which are certainly not totally watertight, as few authors appear to know that Buyse obtained his doctorate in “pedology” and not in “pedagogy”¹⁰⁴—this possibility is interpreted as a categorical refusal of the Catholic (which obviously for Buyse’s biographers, or hagiographers, comes out well).¹⁰⁵ The opposite argument could equally be made that a Catholic did not stand a chance in Brussels.

Wauthier: Adoration or Love?

The revelation of a love affair dealt a blow to the Decroly myth. In 1985, 81-year-old Marie-Louise Wauthier¹⁰⁶ published extracts from his letters to her revealing a love affair with the master, then thirty-three years her senior.¹⁰⁷ Wauthier met Decroly in October 1923 when she became his student. In 1926–1927 she completed her teaching practice with Hamaïde and in 1928 started a private school in Forest that operated according to the Decroly method and which he regularly visited; he lived nearby. The romantic Decroly saw Wauthier as the ideal of the “feminized” woman.

[T]he heroine who spurns vulgar felicity and finds happiness in the sacrifice of the pleasure which is appropriate to the creatures of flesh who are the majority of those of the race. . . . She always seemed happier to give all her being to the one she had chosen, each time she experienced a deeper bliss in being caressed, hearing the sweet words of intense love which he pronounced like a breath to her charmed ears, each time her body in spite of herself surrendered more and more to voluptuous pleasure with which her soul until then had trembled and she felt little by little all the propriety which protected her until then vanish little by little under the surge of triumphant affection which had totally conquered her.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴Marc Depaepe, *Zum Wohl des Kindes? Pädologie, pädagogische Psychologie und experimentelle Pädagogik in Europa und den USA, 1890–1940* (Weinheim/ Leuven: Deutscher Studien Verlag/ Leuven University Press, 1993), 472 [= *Beiträge zur Theorie und Geschichte der Erziehungswissenschaft* 14].

¹⁰⁵Arthur Gille, “Raymond Buyse, promoteur de la pédagogie expérimentale,” in *L’œuvre pédagogique de Raymond Buyse* ed. Anna Bonboir (Louvain/ Brussels: Vander, 1969), 22: “The Université Libre de Bruxelles offered to engage Buyse as professor. But he declined this flattering invitation out of fidelity to the principles of his Christian faith.”

¹⁰⁶There was a teacher active in the new school movement in France with the same name, who followed in the footsteps of Roger Cousinet. See Louis Raillon, *Roger Cousinet. Une pédagogie de la liberté* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), 85–86, 91, 94, 96. But it appears out of the question that it would be the same person because the French M.L. Wauthier ran a school from 1919, and the Belgian one at that time was still only 15 years old. In addition, there is no mention anywhere in her biographical story of this French experience. Moreover, Wauthier’s academic file at the ULB, where she was an assistant from 1938 to 1945, confirms that she was born in Sint-Gillis (Brussels).

¹⁰⁷Marie-Louise Wauthier, *Correspondance d’Ovide Decroly* (Genappe : Imprimerie Detienne, n.d.).

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 15–16.

This love appeared to be entirely reciprocal: "Without having experienced 'love at first sight,' I had been enthralled from the first approach by the strong personality of Doctor Decroly. I felt attracted by him, all the more as I was encouraged by the sympathy he showed towards me in replying with kindness to the questions I put to him when his course was finished."¹⁰⁹

Wauthier's courageous life story, which she had waited to tell until after Decroly's children had died, without a doubt provides some points of departure for researchers who wish to reduce the hagiography to more "realistic" proportions. From their relationship and the anxious attempts to keep it secret—letters that might be intercepted begin not with "*petite chérie*" but with "*Mademoiselle*" and were entirely matter-of-fact in nature—it can be established that Decroly (who translated Dewey, or did Guisset [Madame] and Decordes do it?)¹¹⁰ did not speak English very well. Wauthier herself appears to have wanted to perpetuate the Decroly myth. In her book, she assigned the Master just as many superlatives as did the other colleagues who wrote about him: he was the indefatigable worker with a very kind heart, who took no time for himself and ran from one place another.¹¹¹ In brief, Decroly became a model of altruism, making the ultimate sacrifice with his early death. Wauthier wanted to visit him on his deathbed, but the social pressure of the bourgeois milieu dissuaded her: "I crossed the path of the people who were going to pay their last homage to this exceptional man, but I could not make up my mind to follow them and left again, alone on the familiar path."¹¹²

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? It certainly cannot be denied that Decroly was a praiseworthy man and that is certainly not our intention. Nor is it for us, out of some frustration, a case of splitting hairs.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁰In Decroly's foreword to his translation of Dewey's *How We Think* [John Dewey, *Comment nous pensons* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1925)], his thanks are expressed to Valérie Decordes and a certain Miss Olivier, secretary of the *Foyer des Orphelins*, "who have aided him in his enterprise" (p. 11). One of the letters Mrs. Decroly wrote to Mrs. Libois, the director of the *Ermitage* at that time [1953], contains this sentence: "J'avais traduit apres [sic] 1914 une partie du livre de Dewey. . . ." (cf. Documents bio-bibliographiques, Uccle: C.E.D.). We know that Decroly always received much help from his colleagues as well as from Mrs. Decroly in the translation and summarizing of many books. This seems to have also been the case here in our opinion.

¹¹¹For example Wauthier, *Correspondance d'Ovide Decroly*, 64. See also our earlier analysis: Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, "'Mon ami, monsieur Decroly.' De rol van de biografie in de pedagogische wetenschapsgeschiedenis," in *Gezin, morele opvoeding en antisociaal gedrag. Thema's uit de empirische, wijsgerige en historische pedagogiek. Bijdragen aan de 9^e Landelijke Pedagogendag* eds. Hans De Frankrijker, Hans-Jan Kuipers, Joke Scholtens, and René van der Veer (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij SWP, 2000), 221–227.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 79.

We wish to demonstrate that Decroly first of all was “human,” like everyone else, and not a demigod. As we have already argued with regard to the demythologizing of Montessori: people can only be “great” despite of, and because of, the human context,¹¹³ and this, in any case, is and remains imperfect. It would be an affront to the principles that Decroly, as a “seeker of truth,” cherished and that his hagiographers have laid on so enthusiastically if we, for whatever reason, tried to veil the truth.

If we consider the mythologization diachronically, then it is striking that the canonized image has been maintained over time. The mythological packaging of Decroly’s life and work, as well as the embroidering of its impact, begun by his close entourage actually never left the circles of the *Decrolyens*.¹¹⁴ Apart from a few internal squabbles, this entourage formed a solid block with respect to the public and impressed the image it created on the official reading of educational historiography. To continue our metaphor, they made the school, which was already being visited by many during Decroly’s lifetime, a true pilgrimage site. The concern for the cult of the Master was, in any case, adopted by enthusiastic followers until far into the 1980s. How can one otherwise account for how even a solid historian of education like Brian Simon (1915-2002) could have relied completely on the stereotyping of Decroly’s disciples when he wrote in his memoirs about his visit to Ermitage in 1938: “The visit was memorable in that it introduced us to a modern school embodying systematic but ‘progressive’ principles. . . . This school (and movement) still continues in Brussels and, I believe, continues to flourish.”¹¹⁵

Further specialized research into the biographical and socio-historical networks that link the preservers of the mythologized heritage with the outside world will have to determine what layers can be found in the “commemoration” of Decroly—a notion that also deserves theoretical and methodological deepening in the framework of the same research¹¹⁶—and what factors played a determining role in it. This question is certainly not negligible in a pillarized country like Belgium, which has cultural conflicts between the Dutch and the French speakers and, linked to them, opposi-

¹¹³Marc Depaepe, “Montessori privée du piédestal? Compte rendu de deux études récentes aux Pays-Bas,” *Paedagogica Historica* XXXV/2 (1999): 425-431.

¹¹⁴See, for example, Francine Dubreucq, “Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932),” *Bulletin de Psychologie* 53 (2000): 643-652.

¹¹⁵Brian Simon, *A Life in Education* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), 26-27.

¹¹⁶See Willem Frijhoff, “Education’s memory,” in *Education and Cultural Transmission: Historical Studies of Continuity and Change in Families, Schooling and Youth Cultures* eds. Johan Sturm, Jeroen Dekker, Richard Aldrich, and Frank Simon (Ghent: CSHP, 1996), 343 [= *Paedagogica Historica Supplementary Series* 2]. See also Karl Catteeuw, Marc Depaepe, and Frank Simon, “Forschungsprojekt Pädagogisches Gedächtnis Flanderns,” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung/International Textbook Research* III/20 (1998): 313-325.

tion between freethinkers and Catholics.¹¹⁷ In view of our unfolding research, we can, for the time being, do little more than offer a few hypotheses that we hope to be able to explore further in the future.

It appears, as time passed, the “believers” detached themselves ever further from the historic reality and further stimulated mythologization. Only researchers who viewed from a more distant perspective were, in principle, able to free themselves from it, literally and otherwise. But the problem they confronted—apart from the fact that the traditional educational historiography was colored by this self-discourse of Decroly and of the reform pedagogy—was that the primary source material remained in the hands of the myth builders. The believers, in this sense, continued to hold the researchers hostage.¹¹⁸ The Decrolyans even reduced the confession of a love affair, which initially had caused a stir among the orthodox camp, to the proportions it deserved, that of an “incident.”

At the same time, it looked as though this watchful attention by mostly female admirers can be interpreted from a more positive point of view. More than Decroly himself, they succeeded in giving a “language” to his story. In analogy with what Kevin Brehony stated with respect to Froebel,¹¹⁹ we can offer the position that Ovide Decroly’s success was achieved largely through the agency of his female colleagues. They gave meaning and content to his language and discourse, which, like “pedagogical” discourse in general and “reform pedagogical” discourse in particular, was “feminized.”¹²⁰

However, of course, this does not enable us to avoid the ultimate question about the merits of Decroly himself. If we do indeed have to assign him a demythologized meaning in the light of educational history, then presumably, we will not go far wrong if we say that he, like no other, had a feeling for combining the diverse scientific expositions that served as matrix and paradigms for emerging disciplines. Ultimately, however, this combination was not much more than the articulation of the scientific concepts that were in the air and from which Decroly could pluck to his heart’s content. The myth builders have tried to extol him as an original thinker, who developed “brilliant” concepts in these different disciplinary fields and thus had a true pioneering role certainly as regards the science of the child. Our research indicates that this is just one bridge too far. Rather than

¹¹⁷Dominique Grootaers et al., *Histoire de l’enseignement en Belgique* (Brussels: CRISP, 1998).

¹¹⁸For example Besse, *Ovide Decroly*; Bassan, *Comment intéresser l’enfant à l’école*.

¹¹⁹Brehony, “From the particular to the general,” 428.

¹²⁰Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, “Feminización de la enseñanza en Bélgica, siglos XIX y XX,” in *Primer Congreso Internacional sobre los Procesos de Feminización del Magisterio. Currículum vitae. Resumen de ponencias*, 21, 22 y 23 febrero de 2001 eds. Luz Elena Galván, Oresta López, and Sonsoles San Román Gago (San Luis de Potosí: S.L.P. México El Colegio de San Luis, 2001), 13.

Decroly being “ahead” of his time and science, he was himself an industrious product of it who, with the existing concepts, synthesized, compiled, and combined insights. He did this admittedly with an aura of authenticity, but this was the result of his charisma, commitment, capacity for work, position, and the constant anchoring of his ideas in practice.