

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ANOMALIES OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS.

(II.)

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I spent some months, a few years since, in pretty frequent and close intercourse with a young man who, though then certainly unknown in his inner life to any medical man, was a pretty highly pathological instance of the more metaphysical type of the malady of self-consciousness. He came for counsel as a young genius, willing to let me read endless manuscript productions of his own, including his diaries, which I was permitted to examine. He was disposed to get some advice about his intended career as a poet, as man of free soul, and as independent person generally. He was a man of twenty-four, in easy circumstances, uncontrolled by his parents, of fairly robust physical appearance, and, so far as I could guess, of generally good vegetative health—a man who had certainly so far been able to bear, without much physical inconvenience, the strain of a good deal of dissipation. No serious illnesses were admitted in his past since childhood. His appetite and sleep were reported as good; his emotional undertone, however hard you tested him, was one of pretty steady cheerfulness, even in the midst of his greatest perplexities; his social manners were gentle, and on the whole rather feminine in their kindliness, their plasticity, their somewhat girlish type of half-timid vanity. His friends had long regarded him as an extraordinary person, possibly a genius, certainly a puzzle. At school he had done well, especially in such writing as he printed in school journals; had won a really skilful control over several forms of verse, had tried his hand at romantic prose with fluency, and had always shown a good deal of artistic sensibility. Mentally he still retained a rich element of true naïveté about

him, despite his maladies. He had an intense though romantically vague love of nature, of living creatures, of young children, of tender and sweet things generally, and this fondness again was often expressed with a relatively feminine enthusiasm and simplicity.

But now, on the basis of this child-like and so far keenly suggestible nature, with its sensitive but physically vigorous *naïveté*, there was superimposed a second nature, colored, and partly determined, apparently, by the inherited bent and the acquired habits of his sexual life. The latter had gradually become a life of excesses and of pronounced and openly defended libertinism. His disorders in this respect were reinforced by considerable capriciously irregular drinking, by many cigarettes, and by much strong coffee. As to all these habits, my charge was absolutely stubborn, had no moments of repentance, never was suggestible, in this region of his life, and occasionally became, if reasoned with upon such topics, strangely brutal in tone, especially in letters which he wrote to me, and which contrasted singularly with his gentleness when in my company, and with the almost uniform suggestibility of his moods whenever we talked together. These incidents of what proved to be a decidedly pathological love of excitement were, however, not the most immediate of the symptoms of mental disturbance. At all events the dissipations were not the mere overflow of a wastefully vigorous physical nature. They were, as it proved, the accompaniments of a highly ominous eccentricity of general mental temperament. My charge had already shown, in writings produced in his later boyhood, and submitted to me amongst the rest, a strong tendency to a partially incoherent wealth of half automatic trains of words, images, and ideas. This trait remained in him during the time when I knew him, and, while it was plainly made worse by his excesses, I could not at all refer its origin to these habits. For the elements of the process were all present in his writings at fifteen years of age, while his physical habits were of recent growth. The trait never showed itself in his speech in any such form as in his writings. His set compositions at school, and in school papers, failed to show his defects.

But they were manifest in all that he wrote for himself. It was when he was alone that the impulse to this half-automatic thinking, imaging, dreaming, and writing would seize him. Then came processes whose character was decidedly marked, and very often repeated. A wholly imaginary scene or situation, usually represented in pretty vivid visual terms, would come to mind, and my charge would begin to weave a story about this scene, or to elaborate the matter in a poem or to write an essay. From the outset this scene or situation would seem to the man himself, however, not the mere beginning of a possible train of voluntary production, but an insistently significant *symbol* of something pretty mysterious, and very vague; and his process of composition was always an effort *to find out what the symbol meant*. The sincerity of this inner attitude towards his symbolic images I had occasion to test in many ways, and I became very sure of the genuineness of my subject's expressions as to this matter. He had, to be sure, as yet, no trace of any system of interpretation, and no actual delusions as to the real existence of any definite kind of wisdom to be gained in this way. But the inner questions: What does this symbol mean? What is this that has come to me? How can I find out what I mean by this idea?—these were at such times simply insistent questions, and they forced upon the subject a perplexing and fascinating sort of brooding, which filled up altogether too much of his life when alone, and, at the time when I knew him, determined a very busy activity of literary composition. The symbols varied very widely from time to time, both as to content and as to kind of significance. Now they were romantic situations, involving forests, ruined castles, mysterious mansions, lonely streams. Now they seemed to be of a more purely metaphysical implication. The result of the appearance of such a symbol might be some hours of silent brooding, or of half-automatic writing, which was carried on with a strong sense of combined delight and puzzle, with a good many marked but capricious changes of bodily sensations—flushings and other physical excitements of various content, which were often carefully noted as the man wrote. The result was never a solution

of the puzzle; on the contrary the tangle was always increased, until the subject abandoned his case in weariness. The most of his actually completed compositions were short poems, seldom or never free from some marked defects of form, but occasionally decidedly skilful, and, in some instances, remarkably coherent, and even, in themselves, promising. Here my subject's wide reading, and his sense for verse forms helped him, although again the influence of Walt Whitman was often disastrous. But the poems never solved his problems. On the other hand his prose remained, at the time when I knew him, always fragmentary. It was devoted to the symbols, and was consequently hopelessly formless, often degenerating in various places with the most frankly avowed incoherence. At such moments the writer would plainly say that he was dealing with the inexpressible, and must simply do what he could. The composition of this prose was dominated by the aforesaid ominous and uncontrollable automatism of associative processes. Images, self-analysis, new puzzles, occasionally new symbols, trooped in masses. The writer could only look on, and report his inspirations. To be sure, he never quite lost track of his original inquiry, and often returned afresh to his starting point, in such a way as to show clearly the insistence of his dominating question. But the story, or essay, or analysis, or confession, to which the symbol gave rise, was a chaos of uselessly recorded broodings, as far beyond rationally definite control as were his often lively dreams when really asleep. Characteristic of the case it was however that the steady sense of wonder and perplexity never left him in all this composition, and this alone gave to his papers any genuine unity, and saved them from being a mere record of a flight of ideas. They had no result; but they always had their precisely defined purpose, viz., to solve the mystery of the meaning of this symbol.

But my subject did not live altogether alone. His dissipations were carried on in company, and this company included many people. And now appeared the other side of his case. His social sensitiveness, influenced, as I judged, by his strongly sensuous nature, was as remarkable as were

his automatic processes. In conversation, I have said, he was kindly and suggestible. His sense of perplexity seldom wholly left him, and often made him converse in a curiously broken and fragmentary way, with some of the confusedness, although never with the automatic wealth, of his writings. But apart from this, his social sensitiveness showed itself in the form of an endless series of somewhat feminine, and seldom ungraceful poses. He assumed various attitudes, expressed various moods, ideals, aims, according as the conversation led him. He himself complained sometimes of an inner sense of insincerity in these poses; while the latter actually had the same kind of automatic insincerity that one notes in the dramatic attitudes of many of those more or less hysterically disposed women, who, when in company, are not merely normally plastic, but are even fatally at the mercy of the now suggested conversational mood or bearing or impersonation. To be sure, my subject, at his worst, never had so wide a range of poses as such an hysterically disposed woman would have, but was constantly limited by his insistent inner wonder as to why he was doing and saying all these things, when probably he meant none of them. Here then was a second source of confusedness in his life. To one who saw as much of bad company as this man, and who also sought out many other kinds of company, this automatic suggestibility was likely to prove almost as disorganizing as were his stubborn lonely broodings.

To complete the picture one has only to note that my subject's social sensitiveness especially showed itself in the form of certain intense and instantaneous impressions which he had concerning people's characters when he first met new acquaintances. These absolutely self-confident seeming intuitions of character phenomena which, as you all doubtless know, are not infrequent as an automatic emotional process in certain sensitive persons, usually took for my subject the characteristic form before described. They were namely, in him, intuitions which appeared as symbols, mysterious, attractive, baffling, like the symbols of his lonely broodings. Only these symbols of characters came to him as reflexes whenever he first met some person who chanced to attract

his notice. At the sight of such a person there at once flashed into his mind the symbol—a scene, a typical mythical act which this person was at once visualized as doing, or again, a wholly mysterious inanimate object, or the inner vision another person, apparently very unlike this one. The symbol came with the feeling: ‘This means what, at heart, this new acquaintance truly is.’ But meanwhile came also the insistent question: ‘What does this symbol mean?’ For the symbol was seldom or never one of any sure meaning at all. Only, as my subject told me, whatever he later came to learn of the new acquaintance’s character, always got assimilated to the symbol, and served to confirm or to explain it. The symbol thus, of course, never turned out to be inapplicable. But in further intercourse my subject always watched with insistent eagerness for every clue that the new acquaintance gave of his true personality. My subject consequently loved to stare, with a characteristic intentness, at people’s faces and movements. This broodingly curious stare he tried, because of his social geniality, to conceal, and further, his frequently puzzled self-absorption combined with other motives to give his facial play and his gestures, when in company, a singularly unequal and inconsistent seeming. Now he looked down long and steadily, with a puzzled smile, at his hands; now he glanced up slyly and timidly as he talked; now giving way to his curiosity about character-study, he stared at you eagerly with an expression of rapt absorption, and again assuming one of the aforesaid dramatic poses, he gave himself over to the momentary mood, and acted more or less completely in character, often adding the observation that he doubted his own sincerity all the while. But of the sincerity of the experiences with the character-symbols there could be no doubt. For some of his lengthiest essays were devoted to character-studies founded upon just such symbols, whose possible meanings he developed in the aforesaid formless fashion. The imagery of the symbols often had, for the rest, a suspiciously coarse and cynical content.

Here, then, on the foregoing theory, were the most manifold materials for abnormal habits of self-consciousness:—a

notably variable common sensibility, heightened by the now moderately irritating results of my subject's toxic and other excesses; a large collection of fascinating automatic associative processes, usually felt to be uncontrollable; an inner stubbornness of self-will, inconsistently linked with an excessive social plasticity, which resulted in many poses, also uncontrollable; a collection of socially determined emotional reflexes, which expressed themselves to consciousness in the form of the character-symbols aforesaid, and which led to an absorbing disposition to brood with an ineffective curiosity over the inner life of other people. All this occurred in a brain of more than average although formless wealth of intellectual processes, and in a man of some artistic taste and sensibility, and of considerable, although decidedly irregular, cultivation.

The actual result was a fairly monumental disorder of self-consciousness, which pervaded the man's whole work and life. That, amongst other things, this man for a while played at studying philosophy, you will perhaps find not surprising; but his philosophical study was of the crudest and most fragmentary sort, and served only to give him a few phrases in which to embody his puzzles; and, for the rest, I warned him away from all such studies, so soon as I had fairly made out his condition. For such men as he was philosophy, as I told him, can indeed do only mischief. But whatever his phrases, it was not any serious philosophical reflection, nor any other theoretical motive, that guided him when he brooded over the endless and insistent problem of problems in his life, viz., the question: "Who am I, and what do I really want or mean in this world?" Since he was fifteen years old, as he repeatedly told me, he had simply been waiting, in growing chaos, in idleness, in dissipation, varied by his activities as a writer—waiting till light should come as to who he was, and what he was here for. With a pathetic eagerness he used to beg me to make out his case, and to answer his question, that he might learn to live, and see his way out of the darkness. But as a fact, since he was emotionally a cheery man, despite all his perplexities and his occasionally keen sufferings, he really did

not want to find any way out at all. His real interest in coming to me was simply to get a listener. He once called his inner world, just as it was, his fairy land. He was plainly minded to stay there—and in the end so far as I was able to follow his career, he stayed. For some years I have lost sight of him. Of course, while he was near me, I did what I could; but the case was too temperamental for any effective treatment.

One example of my subject's style of written work must end this sketch. I choose almost at random, but not for the sake of illustrating what was least sane about my charge. On the contrary it is the slighter variation from the norm which is often most instructive. My records of the case give me such processes by the dozen. And this example is not by any means amongst the worst as to coherence. There is no reason to suppose the following passage to have been written under any direct toxic influence, and what I knew of my subject's habits rendered such an hypothesis, in this instance, quite unnecessary. This was his routine fashion of half-automatic brooding when alone. On this occasion he had been writing for an hour or two, in an essay spontaneously prepared for my eye, concerning a certain ideal that had come to him, after reading Newcomb's *Popular Astronomy*,—an ideal of an impersonal and heavenly sort of self-possessed wisdom, which, as he just then fancied, he desired to attain. What follows is a description of a warfare between this ideal sort of selfhood, and the passions of his usual sensuously chaotic life:—

“I mean to try to justify myself. Judge you. I'll listen some time when you have fully made up your mind about me. I think I am playing with parts of my character to get rid of them. Do you know I think I haven't any identity at all, down at bottom. I realize it when I am writing in this way. I feel almost mad. I am so out of my ordinary self of personal contact—and squeamish sensitiveness, when touched on occasion to the quick by the living forms about me in intercourse with them. Here's your deepest problem of psychology—the identification with the absolute. I mean the above seriously. I want you to con-

sider it. My sensations on these occasions are extremely peculiar and complex. I feel beyond what I have supposed to be myself, utterly, and yet there lingers the remembrance, and when I stop and head the remembrance, there comes a sharp conflict—an extremely sharp conflict—a mixed feeling in regard to self, as if I were two personalities, two selves—and another self were first turning to one then to the other (and yet it is not the *real* self—and yet again not unreal) and considering which is the right one. When feeling the impersonal self, feeling at the same time that it *must* somehow include in it the personal squeamish self—the one whose desires are gratified—who enjoys existence, the world—eating, drinking, loving, and feeling if it cannot have it, how it must be giving up all the joys of existence—everything that makes life worth living—how if it sacrifices itself it must feel infinitely worse than one feels it has an extremely sore tooth pulled from one's head—how it would be *mad*—insane—being another self than the natural one—yet feeling that the personal self *must* go—that the sore tooth must be extracted once and for all—and yet that it cannot—absolutely *cannot* part from it—for then it would be (yes I mean it—this is the sensation) *naught*—or mad—not myself—a mere machine—somehow—that it cannot realize it otherwise, and just so the feeling goes with the personal self in predominance—only then the impersonal self is so vague so far away—except when writing in this way and on several other like absorbed occasions—or in thinking of future self-conduct, etc.

“Well to renew—the fact of renewing brings me back of course nearer to the narrow personal self.—Oh how can I give up that self!—madness—without the joys of existence—nought—machine—not a self at all—for Sir Isaac Newton had a decided self—and so has Professor X.—they're all narrow more or less (and how can I sacrifice myself—this body and brain cannot even hold the enlarged comparative impersonality of Sir Isaac, without madness—being beside one's self—out of one's self—for he was so constructed as to be that comparatively impersonal self. He was—and I am not—I feel it. But time will tell providing the change is gradual

eh?—And meantime I get rid of much of the burden here—unless the associations occur again too strongly).

“My theme has grown. I’ll wait to catch the threads and then if possible condense.—Meantime I am hot. My head feels stuffy. I feel almost that impersonal self already (queer phraseology this—“impersonal self—This remark a part of personal self). I feel without usual bodily sensations—a fact—without usual sensations, thoughts—ways of thinking—yet stuffy and warm about head and body.—So I say to myself, I give myself up to you to make what use of it you can. The personal self—the narrowest—cries for recompense—says I am foolish—even in saying this ‘foolish’ foolish—says I may be ridiculed.—The more impersonal steps in and says, What then the difference? You (that is I) may be foolish but he (you, Professor Royce) makes use of it—and he understands—you wish to be understood—you have no object—not much object even in this—*but* let the writing go to him. What after all the difference?—And he makes use of it—and you express yourself which after all is a good thing—but again for whom?—yourself—myself. What object again?—justice? love? Who feels the love? Love for Professor Royce?—Why he laughs in a personal way—enjoys himself at Symphony Orchestra Concerts—not *altogether* for the absolute and the progress of the race. He perhaps laughs now—Who? Professor Royce—at me—then I’ll quit writing,—no again, What is the difference? But if no object once more answer me. Why do I write? After all it must be for self. No—yes—but again what is the difference? For self once more—for love—for the very fact that you are indifferent—no and yes again, etc. So the contest goes on and after all I keep on writing—yes I believe for myself. I believe I’m sure of that.”

My theses in the foregoing have been:—

1. Self-conscious functions are all of them, in their primary aspect, social functions, due to the habits of human intercourse. They involve the presentation of some contrast between Ego and non-Ego. This psychological contrast is primarily that between the subject’s own conscious act, idea, intent, or other experience, and an experience which is re-

garded by him as representing the state of another's mind. By means of habits gradually acquired, this contrast early comes to be extended to include that between one's inner states and the represented realities which make up the physical world.

2. In the primary cases of contrast between Ego and non-Ego, the former—the Ego—always includes (for reasons which have been explained in the foregoing), the present modifications of the common sensibility, and the feelings of the sense of control, where these are present at all. The latter, the psychological non-Ego, is a colder, a more localized, and less controllable mass of mental contents.

3. Emotional states, and in general all those modifications of the common sensibility which uniformly accompany any of our social reflexes, become, by association, linked with our memories and ideas of social situations, and cannot be repeated without more or less clearly or vaguely reminding us of such social situations in an individual or in a summary form.

4. When social situations involving particular contrasts of Ego and non-Ego are remembered or imagined, we become self-conscious in memory, or in idea. When emotions, associated by old habit with social situations, dimly or summarily suggest such situations, with their accompanying contrast of Ego and non-Ego, our self-consciousness gets colored accordingly. Finally, when the varied contents of our isolated consciousness involve in any way, as they pass, contrasts which either remind us of the social contrast between Ego and non-Ego, or excite us to acts involving social habits, such as questioning, or internal speech, we become reflectively self-conscious, even when quite alone with our own states.

5. The anomalies of self-consciousness are (1) primary alterations of the common sensibility, or of the other contents of passing consciousness, such as dimly or clearly suggest anomalous social situations, contrasts and functions; or else they are (2) primary anomalies in one's social habits themselves. The two forms can be of course to any degree combined.