PATIENCE WORTH

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The reader has probably had his attention called by the press to the writings of the author known as Patience Worth, and to the discussion that has arisen concerning them. During the past two years it has been possible for me to study the phenomenon at close range. Some of its features are of interest to psychology.

It should be said at once that the case is one upon which no satisfactory report can be made without the aid of hypnosis. Anything like a real explanation of the problems to be solved requires data that can be obtained in no other way. These problems are, as will be seen, (1) subconscious memory and perception, (2) subconscious thought. Without hypnosis these problems lie largely in obscurity. Hypnosis has been refused because of a fear that it might injure or destroy the ability to write, and not, I believe, through a desire to avoid a thorough investigation. It has seemed, however, worth while to report the case, and to show what the problems really are in the light of facts that have been verified. To this general statement I shall add, at the close, some reflections of a tentative character.

In describing the case it will make for clearness if the reader will understand that Patience Worth, the writer, is a subconscious personality of Mrs. John Curran, of St. Louis. About five years ago Mrs. Curran began to write, automatically, literature of an unusual character. Since that time novels, plays, and poems have appeared. Over fifteen hundred poems have been written. Two of the novels, 'The Sorry Tale' and 'Hope Trueblood,' have been published by Henry Holt & Co. Four additional novels are in various stages of completion. Most of this literature is conceded by critics to be of a very high order. No two of the larger works

are written in the same English. They range from a very old English to one that is in nearly all respects modern. *The New York Sun* said of 'Hope Trueblood': "It is a story that George Elliot might not have been ashamed to own up to." Of the 'Sorry Tale,' *The New York Times* in reviewing it, said: "The long intimate tale is constructed with the precision and accuracy of a master hand. It is a wonderful, a beautiful, and a noble book." And from the *Boston Transcript's* review of the same book I quote: "The thoughtful reader will marvel at its beauty, its poetry, its power. The impression is that it is the work of a literary artist." Mr. Reedy, the editor of *The Mirror*, and a distinguished critic, says of it: "This is the most remarkable piece of literature I have ever read. I have no hesitation in saying that this production (I ignore any religious claim for it, and I discount that adventitious interest in the manner of its appearance) is a world literary marvel."

Mrs. Curran is a woman thirty-five years of age. Her education did not extend beyond the grammar school. Her general reading has been meager and desultory. She has not been abroad, and has travelled but little in America. She has no experience or practice in writing, and never entertained any aspiration to authorship. The one ambition of her life has been to sing. She has a good voice, and until Patience Worth 'arrived,' her entire energy was given to its cultivation. No one could be more surprised and mystified by what has taken place than Mrs. Curran. It should not be inferred that Mrs. Curran is an unintelligent woman. On the contrary, she is very intelligent. Her quick intuitive understanding is recognized by all who know her well. A conversation with her, however, though based upon an extended acquaintance, does not give the impression that one is in the presence of the mind that wrote 'The Sorry Tale.' And so foreign to her entire life do Patience Worth and her writings seem, that both she and Mr. Curran have, from the beginning, looked upon her as a disembodied spirit. Toward her they hold an attitude of awe and reverence.

Before writing, Mrs. Curran appears to have no intima-

tion of what is coming. She shares with those present complete ignorance on this point. It may be one of several novels, poetry, or general discourse. Without delay the writing proceeds, and with a speed that frequently outstrips that of the most expert longhand writer. In the most difficult part of a novel she has written as high as five thousand words in an evening. The composition is final. A complete record has been kept of all that has been written. These records, running back to the first manifestations, afford a good outer history of the case. Aside from the literary output, the discussions and conversations fill many volumes.

A thing that gives special interest to this literature is that most of it reflects the life and manners of other times, and this it does with an intimacy that astonishes the reader. They presuppose upon the part of the author, a wealth of information, a richness of contact that is normally secured only through a prolonged study. 'The Sorry Tale' is a large and intricately woven novel dealing with Jewish and Roman life at the beginning of our era, involving an enormous mass of knowledge of the life and customs of that time. It is a powerful drama, full of subtle humor and seasoned wisdom. 'Telka,' an unpublished poem of seventy thousand words, has an English background. The language used is unlike that of her other works. It is an archaic English of different periods, and various localities. It is difficult to understand how it could be used as a medium of poetry by a modern writer. And the source of this language is a part of the general problem. 'Hope Trueblood' has an English setting of the early mid-nineteenth century. 'The Merry Tale' goes back to the days of the cross-bow. It is a humorous tale of rough tavern life. The language is not modern, and the general reader would find it difficult. Only a reading of the million and a half words that have been written can give an adequate idea of the great reservoir of knowledge that is accessible to this secondary personality. A careful survey of Mrs. Curran's reading from childhood leaves the problem of its source largely unsolved. What she may have heard, or rather, what may have been said in her presence, is another

matter, and, obviously, a far more difficult thing to determine. But a knowledge of the interests that have dominated her life forces the conclusion that most of this material did not pass into her mind through the channel of her conscious attention. What her total environment has been, and just how that environment has been appropriated, is the question. And the problem is complicated by the fact that there have been two selves, that is, two centers of apperception drawing upon that environment. Hence no history of Mrs. Curran in terms of an ordinary biography could hope to solve the problem. Not one, but two histories must be traced. So far only one has been followed. And its value, in view of the probability that the dissociation is of long standing, is, and could be, only indirect. It only defines the problem, marking off the residue to be explained by processes which did not enter her consciousness. And there is in the material thus left, much that is significant for the study of subconscious perception and memory.

But even more significant, it seems to me, is the bearing which the case has upon the problem of subconscious reflection processes, or those that are commonly so called. It offers a new answer to the question that is of growing interest, namely: What degree of rationality may the processes of a subconscious center attain? Here there is a product showing a mentality of a very high order. It is original, creative, possessing a delicate sense of beauty, a hardy rationality, and, above all, and perhaps most surprising, a moral and spiritual elevation. Patience Worth easily meets most tests that are applied to the normal personal consciousness. In conversation she displays a quickness of insight, a readiness of repartee that enables her to hold her own in the company of the learned. Mrs. Curran is an intelligent woman, but her mind is much inferior to that of Patience Worth. In short, here is a subconscious self far outstripping in power and range the primary consciousness. This is an indisputable fact, and it is a significant one for psychology. In some way the dissociation has resulted in the formation of a self with greatly increased caliber. It has not only given it access to

a much wider range of material, but it has given it a facile creative power amounting to genius. It is hard to give an adequate impression of the versatility of this mind. Intricate composition proceeds with astonishing ease. During an evening she may write alternately upon several novels, passing from one to the other without a moment's pause. And this work is accomplished without the aid of manuscripts. While writing Mrs. Curran does not have before her the finished portions of these works. A novel untouched for weeks or months will be resumed at just the point where it was broken off.

When writing, Mrs. Curran goes into no trance. In other words, the primary self is not displaced, or it would be more accurate to say that the modification that occurs does not amount to an alternation of personality. To the casual observer no change is noted. There is, however, some abstraction. This is more pronounced than it was formerly. When the writing began, it was read from the board; an ouidja is used, in the usual manner. But years of practice have made it possible to write with only an occasional reference to the printed letters. A general movement of the hand is now sufficient to throw the letters into the consciousness of Mrs. Curran, and these are rapidly spoken as they appear. Not only do the letters appear but the entire panorama of the story seems to move before her, like pictures on a screen. Within the field of the primary consciousness there is a smaller field, and within this field the characters of the novels act their rôles and are seen as vividly as on a stage. Apparently the only effort required on the part of Mrs. Curran is that involved in passivity. With the proper abstraction she receives from the secondary self the letters and imagery. The meaning of what is written is, naturally enough, frequently not understood by her. Neither its form nor its substance is determined by her consciousness. They are apparently the creation of a self whose existence she is, for the most part, completely unaware of. And this self is no mere by-product of a more fully developed mind. Patience Worth is a personality of tremendous creative energy. And unlike most dissociated personalities she is morally sound.

Is there not here, then, material for a new answer as to what a subconscious mind is capable of doing? But one may ask, is this mind really submerged when it does this creative work? In other words, may it not all be done at the time of writing when Mrs. Curran's abstraction permits a slight emergence above the threshold? And is not this approach to the surface a condition of lucidity? A brief study of the case will eliminate that possibility. It is true that some of the poems are thought out as they are written, that is, they are improvised at the time of writing. And the actual composition of the larger works probably receives at that time its final form. But it is inconceivable that these elaborate and intricately wrought novels should not have been planned before they are so hastily written. And that they are the work of previous thought is confirmed by Patience Worth's own statement. This means that while Mrs. Curran goes about the cares of her household, the other self, unknown to her, may be deep in an English novel. The selves, to repeat, are not alternating but coexistent or co-conscious. Such co-conscious phenomena are now familiar enough to psychology. That which is peculiar to this case is the quality of the mentality of the secondary self. The passage from the primary to the secondary self is not one into a twilight zone or semi-darkness. On the contrary, there is met a mind of a higher order, a mind of decidedly greater power. And of the activity of this self, aside from the slight contact while writing, Mrs. Curran has no knowledge. There is evidence, however, that the secondary consciousness includes much, or possibly all, of the field of the primary consciousness. That is, while Mrs. Curran has no knowledge of Patience Worth, the latter is probably aware, in a way, of all that the former experiences, or may at any time become so.

It is evident that the term subconscious is misleading when used to describe the source of this literature. As generally used it would imply that these works are the product of marginal or submarginal tendencies. This they are, only with reference to the other field. With reference to the self that created them, they are distinctly within the conscious.

The term co-conscious, as used by Prince to describe somewhat similar cases, is helpful here. At all events, and this is the significant thing, these delicate and finely rational processes, these highly elaborate compositions, are performed apparently without the aid or knowledge of Mrs. Curran. Just how these works are composed, and just what the sources for much of the material are, this report has little that is definite to give. It is chiefly interested in attesting to the above facts.

Some reflections, however, have occurred to me in reviewing the case. I accept the judgment that Patience Worth is a genius of no mean order. And, perhaps, there is in the genius of this writer a concrete illustration of what freedom a mind may achieve when released from the inhibitions that clog and check the normal consciousness. She is a dissociated self, and this dissociation has taken place in such a way as to free her from the burdens and concerns of life, from all the claims that split the will and bind the fancy. And perhaps in this fact, and all that it implies, lies the condition of her genius. The division of the self has resulted in a division of labor. To Mrs. Curran falls the care of the needs of the body, and the interests of the social life. Their reactions and distractions are hers. From all this Patience Worth is free. Between her and the entire active phase of life stands the buffer consciousness of Mrs. Curran. In aloofness and abstraction she dwells. She is beyond the reach of perturbation and confusion, and therein lies her strength. Her mind seems to possess the effortless activity, and facility of a dream, a dream without chaos. The normal consciousness is forced constantly to divide its attention between the world of idea and the world of action. The imminence of action is never far removed. Consequently its moments of abstraction or thought are brief and fitful, sustained with effort against the solicitation and lure of sense. The organism requires constant orientation. This holds the attention and divides the energy. It is well that the imagination, in normal life, is weighted and somewhat inert. Action and its world have their claims, and these are, as they should be, strong.

But unless they are to some degree inhibited they tend to absorb consciousness. Fancy is crowded out or sustained with effort. Irrelevant it perishes.

But turn to this dissociated mind and the conditions have changed. The work of adjusting the organism to the environment being left to the other self, the inhibitions which perception places upon the imagination are removed. This sets free and unfettered the mind of Patience Worth. In the realm of the idea she lives, and there she sustains herself without effort. She acknowledges no tie or bond that might take her out of her dream. She is a dreamer that never awakens. And the conditions of this spell are, in a way, the condition of her genius. With her our moments of abstraction, moments that life affords us the luxury of thought and imagination, are prolonged indefinitely. They are, in fact, a fixed condition. In other words, she lives only in a world of thought. And so far she has shown no desire to displace the other self, and alternate with her in the rôle of action. To do so would result in essential modification of her consciousness, and put her under inhibitions from which she is now free.

It is clear that we are here dealing with a mind so constructed as to open up most interesting possibilities. Structurally, the type is so novel that it is hard to imagine either its range or its limitations. Its actual behavior is instructive from every angle, whether it be from that of memory, feeling or thought. In regard to all of these, interesting modifications of normal experience are observable. It is difficult to give an adequate impression of her composition, its ease and rapidity, and no less impressive are her feats of memory, such as reproducing immediately, upon request, an early chapter of 'The Sorry Tale' which had been mislaid, months having elapsed since the time of its writing.

A reference has been made to dreams. While surely very unlike dreams in most respects, there are, I believe, some points of resemblance. Some things are done that would suggest that in a mind of this type the processes have a tempo not normal, probably much accelerated. And since, as in

dreams, this mind is not correlated with action its tempo may resemble more that of dreams than that of normal life. Something like this I know to be definitely affirmed in a case of alternating personalities, that is, one of the selves insists that upon taking control or possession of the body she experiences a noticeable restriction and loss of freedom in her thought. The structural changes involved in such forms of dissociation would provide the explanation for these accounts, should they prove to be statements of fact.

The point in question is one upon which all available data should be brought to bear. The idea would admit significant alterations of normal experience. Processes of mediation, normally requiring considerable time, might approximate immediacy, as seems to be the case in certain dreams, when a highly complex experience presents within itself directly its meaning. Some of the performances of Patience Worth would suggest that she may have some advantage over the normal consciousness in this regard. Such a supposition would also throw some light on her power of orientation, as illustrated in her shifting without pause from one novel to another. In doing this she changes periods of history, and passes at once into another world of feeling and action, and clothes it in a different style and language. As in dreams the appropriate mood and background follows quickly any idea, unchecked by the stability of outward circumstances. Within the mind itself, however, all seems under a nice control.

I have spoken of the rationality and sanity of this strange author. This is the impression of hundreds that have talked to her. And I believe there are few writers that get nearer to the heart of human life. But one need not concede that she is a great genius in order to see the problems involved, and their interest to psychology. I have briefly sketched what they appear to me to be. At another time I hope to make more detailed statement of the case.

One more thing should be mentioned. The assertion was just made that Patience Worth was highly rational, sane. Upon one subject, however, this mind is under an illusion. It is well known that she insists that she is the discarnate

spirit of an English woman who lived in an age now long since passed. She not only insists upon it but she argues her claim at length, and with cleverness. And, to my mind, it is doubtful whether the S. P. R. has on hand better "evidence." That she is honest in this belief there is no reason to doubt. The full history of this illusion, this idea that she is a returned spirit, can be secured only by psycho-analysis. But it is worth noting that Patience Worth made her appearance after Mrs. Curran had spent many evenings with a friend, a confirmed spiritualist, with a view of getting a message from the spirit world. In the atmosphere of expectancy, of hope that a voice from the dead might be heard, she may be said to have been born, and it is more than possible that the idea became, at that time, a vital part of the dissociated self then developing. Thus in this self is found just that idea that would sever it most completely from the dominant personality of Mrs. Curran. This idea, although having, I believe, nothing to do with the real cause of the disintegration, has helped shape and mould her character. What is more she has lived in the atmosphere of the idea ever since the day of her appearance, those about her acting their part in sustaining the illusion. This chapter of the story is too large for this context, but it is an interesting one.

And there is a sense in which her claim to be a disembodied spirit is correct. A self incarnate is generally understood to be a self correlated with, and interested in, the biological needs of the organism, a self articulated with the perceptual and functional life of the body. Its life includes action and conduct. Patience Worth is not embodied in this sense. Back in the recesses of the subconscious she was born. Created in an ideal world, conceived in fancy, she has fashioned herself out of the stuff of the imagination, and there she remains, admitting no interests that would contradict the illusion. Such she believes and understands herself to be, an English spinster of long ago.

But the thing that interests her most is not her own personality, but the religious and spiritual truth that she presents in her poetry and fiction. And in reading these

works, one will find no trace of abnormal tendencies, such as are clearly marked in much of the poetry and painting of Blake, whose experience was in many ways analogous to the case here described. Patience Worth is blessed with an abundance of fine and wholesome humor. And her poetry reflects a mind acquainted with the out of doors, one that has had an intimate contact with the life and moods of nature. These things are mentioned here because they go to make up one's feeling of her general sanity, her mental poise.

But it is to 'The Sorry Tale' that one must go to get the dimensions of her mind, its moral security, and dramatic power. And yet this mind that has plumbed so deeply human experience, and has touched with a sure hand its greatest tragedy, is a mind that is in error regarding its own origin and history. "Many moons ago I lived," she repeats, "Patience Worth my name." And concerning my effort to explain her, she recently made the following comment:

I am molten silver, running.
Let man catch me within his cup.
Let him proceed upon his labor,
Smithing upon me.
Let him with cunning smite
My substance. Let him at his dream,
Lending my stuff unto its creation.
It shall be none the less me.