ILLUSION OF "THE ALREADY SEEN" (PARAMNESIA) AND OF "THE NEVER SEEN" (AGNOSIA)*

BY ALFRED GORDON, M. D.,

PHILADELPHIA

AMONG various manifestations observed in the course of mental affections there are some which may be met with in individuals free from psychoses either as transient episodes of neuropathies or in association with apparently normal states. Such an example we find in "the uncertainty of a perceived impression" also in "the certainty of an impression never perceived." In the first case the individual is not convinced that he recognizes people and objects or scenes which he had seen in reality; in other words he doubts the identity. In the second case the individual believes he recognizes persons or objects which he never met before.

The following few cases will illustrate these curious mental phenomena :

Case I. A young woman of 29, married, highly nervous, observed that when she goes to a theatre or to Church along a certain road well familiar to her she ceases to recognize the same road when she returns home. She follows then the directions in which she came, crosses the same streets, but the latter appear to her new and strange. She stops on her way several times, tries to figure out the streets, but the non-recognition remains over the entire distance until she reaches her house. She observed that this illusion occurs principally when she is under the influence of some strong emotion or when she is physically fatigued. She eventually made a complete recovery.

Case II. A school teacher of 35, married, good physical health, noticed that whenever she left the house of her friend for home she felt she was going in the opposite direction, although in reality the direction was correct. The street she was walking on appeared to her wrong. Like in the first case this would occur only when she was mentally and physically fatigued.

Case III. Man 28 years old, attorney, observed that after spending a whole morning in Court under high tension in trying a

*Read at the meeting of the Philadelphia Psychiatric Society, January, 1921.

case, late in the afternoon would imagine, while in his office, that he is in the same surroundings in which he was in the morning: he felt, that the persons and their gestures were the same, that he himself would use the same expressions, the same arguments, that he experienced the same state of emotion and agitation, otherwise speaking he lived through the same state of activity in which he was engaged in the morning. On another occasion a propos of a violent discussion with one of his clients he perceived a Court proceeding in all its details in which he participated several months previously.

Case IV. Woman of 24, married, has had epilepsy since the age of 16, but the attacks were very rare: one in a year. Within the last six months she developed the following phenomena: on two occasions the near-by-relatives appeared to her as being at a very great distance, thousands of miles away. On another occasion upon visiting another city for the first time, she happened to be taken to a house of an acquaintance where she never was before. She figured out that she knew the house, every room in the house, the furniture in each room, also the relative arrangement and placement of each piece of furniture.

Case V. Woman of 32, married, suffering from attacks of Petit Mal, consisting only of momentary loss of consciousness, presented several times the following phenomena preceding the epileptic attacks. Suddenly in the midst of her family she would conceive an idea that the conversation of her husband or of another relative was literally the same in words, phrases and tone of the voice which she heard years ago.

Case VI. Man of 45, bookkeeper, a psychasthenic, on one occasion while sitting in my office and getting instructions as to the treatment, suddenly exclaimed: "How did it happen that I am now in presence of the President of City Council?"

On another occasion he called out to his colleagues in the business house where he is employed: "Why are you here; I will have you all arrested; you are robbers."

Another time he complained to me in the following manner: "For some time I have noticed that persons whom I meet for the first time, appear to me as if I saw them many times before; it disturbs me considerably so that I am no more able to distinguish the true from the false."

Case VII. Man of 29, clerk in a hotel, a psychasthenic, presented strong doubts in identifying persons. Once in presence of his employer for whom he had been working for 5 years he said: "I am

not totally convinced that you are the man who is the proprietor of this place; I will therefore not say that you are the man whom I see, but I see only an image similar to yours."

His only son died. When he saw the body before the funeral he said: "nothing proves that this is my son's body; I see only an image similar to him."

The seven cases present examples of two abnormal phenomena; in one "the already seen" there is a creation of subjective images poorly adapted to real perceptions. In the other "the never seen" the individual doubts the identity of persons or objects. In case six we find a combination of both manifestations in the same individual.

Irrespective of which of the two phenomena is present, there is a common characteristic in all the cases of this category, namely: an inability at the time being of recognizing reality from unreality, the objective from the subjective. On the other hand a fundamental distinction is evident in both phenomena. In the illusion of "the already seen" there is a transient and a very brief sensation of going over again through a part of one's past life; the individual merely finds in the present his own personality of the past. There is consequently no fundamental alteration of judgment.

In the illusion of false recognition on the contrary, we are dealing with an erroneous belief of a continuous character, but not with a vague impression. The perception is definite and determined, it concerns person or groups of persons, an object or groups of objects, which of course implies a radical alteration of judgment.

An analysis of the mechanism of recognition or non-recognition leads to the following considerations:

In the first case, for example, the patient returns home from Church and automatically crosses the same streets as when she went to Church, but in the reverse direction. The streets, however, appear to her strange. In the second case the patient feels that she goes in an opposite direction leaving a friend's house for home. In both cases the phenomenon resembles somewhat the experience one has in counting numbers in a reversed manner, say from 100 back to one. In the latter the sense of association and consequently the association force so-to-speak are less strong than those of direct association, viz: in the direction from one to hundred. Could the phenomenon under consideration be explained on this basis?

In the first of my cases the automatic walking along the streets in the opposite direction was apparently without any participation of

the images that the streets left normally in her mind since she walked so many times in the correct direction. In other words all perceptions dropped out completely when the direction was reversed and when the associative powers became lessened. However it does not seem entirely satisfactory to explain the sense of non-recognition of old perceptions exclusively on the basis of a change in the direction of those images. Recognition by association of former images cannot be explained exclusively by their resemblances or by their contiguity.

Bergson in his "*Matière et Mémoire*" does not rely upon recollection of images but believes that the sense of recognition is intimately associated with the movements of the body; it is the action of the latter but not the mental representation that makes one capable to recognize perceptions. The sense of familiarity has for its basis an organized motor reaction. He says: "The characteristics of the system of organized movements lie in the difficulty of modifying their order; each movement which follows depends on the preceding movements; each note of a melody for example, is close to the following note in order to watch over its execution. If each usual perception is accompanied by an organized motor phenomenon, the usual sense of recognition has its root in the conscience of this organization."

Ribot also feels that there is no perceptions which is not continued in movements. The series of visual perceptions, which constitute, for example, a street, provokes a series of motor reactions which when preceded always in the same order, became organized. Should this motor organization be disturbed or interrupted in its arrangement and with it the sense of familiarity such as we observe when perceptions appear in a reversed order, the sensation of "never seen," of "newness" is bound to appear.

Janet (*Obsessions et Psychasthénie*) had well described in psychasthenic individuals a sense of incompleteness which is manifested not only in actions but also in perceptions; everything concerning them is incomplete. There is in them a diminution of higher mental power, a diminution of the function of reality, a lowering of nervous and mental tension. Precisely by virtue of these characteristics the sensation of the "already seen" or of the "never seen" may appear simultaneously with other phenomena. These manifestations through the manner in which they appear and disappear, belong to the group of Janet's psycholepsy. In altered psychic tension which is typical of psychasthenics the latter see one object and identify it mistakenly as another or they believe that they recognize objects as well familiar,

although they see it for the first time. Under the term "psycholepsy," many mental experiences of a different nature may be understood and the subject under discussion is one of its aspects.

In spite of the fact that attacks of psycholepsy are met with most frequently in Psychoses and in cases of psychasthenia, nevertheless it must be borne in mind that they may occur as isolated occurrences also in normal individuals under the influence of intoxications according to Janet (*Journal de Psychologie* 1908, p. 89), also as we saw in some of my cases under the influence of fatigue and emotions when there is no evidence of lowering of mental tension. The phenomenon of disturbed "recognition" by itself is therefore not pathognomonic of a fundamental psychic alteration in the personality at the time being, since it may occur in normal states of health. For its interpretation we must call upon several factors simultaneously as we have seen above, namely: a reversed order of perceptions, rupture in the organization of motor reactions, incompleteness of sensations and finally a profound alteration of psychic operations.

The first two views give a clear insight of all the cases in which the sense of "recognition" is involved. The third view explains the phenomenon as it occurs in psychasthenic individuals.

It is interesting to observe that sometimes the manifestation under discussion is associated with Epilepsy in its major or minor form, in which it may act as an aura or else constitute the entire attack of Petit Mal. Hughlings-Jackson (*Brain*, V. xi, 1889) cites a case of an epileptic who presented the phenomenon of "false recognition" as an aura in his major and minor attacks which were followed by total amnesia not only of the entire convulsive period but also of his paramnesic aura. An instructive case of Petit Mal with a paramnesic aura and illusion of "false recognition" is cited by J. Séglas (*Revue Neurol*, 1909, No. 1, p. 1). Collin among others reports a similar case in which the phenomenon under discussion could be considered as an equivalent of Petit Mal attacks in an individual who had major attacks only very occasionally. (*Revue Neurol*, 1913, (T. xxvi), p. 147). The illusion of "the already seen or perceived" in epileptic individuals may occur *à propos* of a real perception either before or after the loss of consciousness. Sometimes the illusion is a phenomenon of a dreamy state: after a seizure the patients may dream during which time they have the impression of having already lived through it. In other cases the illusion is brought on by a real perception but in a state of epileptic subconsciousness.

The disturbance of the sense of "recognition" in Psychoses is a common phenomenon and finds its *raison d'être* in the fundamental change of the personality, but the consideration of this phase of the subject is beyond the scope of this paper; I will not insist on it.

In conclusion I may say that of all the views presented for the interpretation of the mechanism of the illusions under discussion that of the disturbance in the organized motor reactions is the most satisfactory, while that of Janet's psycholepsy is applicable only to cases of Psychasthenia.