THREE EXAMPLES OF NAME-FORGETTING

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IN his *Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* Freud has shown that many of the little anomalies of mental functioning which frequently occur in both normal and neurotic people may be explained as the result of the influence of certain idea-groups of which the individual is at the time unaware. Among the phenomena thus explained is included the common experience of being unable to recall some familiar name. The mechanism of this difficulty is as follows.

When a group of ideas, or a "complex," is for any reason painful to the conscious personality of an individual, there is apt to occur a process known as repression, by which the complex is more or less excluded from his conscious memory. Speaking less technically, any person is prone to put unpleasant thoughts out of his mind and forget them. But, just as a surgeon in excising a new growth may cut well beyond its borders to make sure he removes it all, so repression, in excluding from consciousness a painful complex, does not stop at the exact limits of this complex, but effects some of the contiguous ideas. In this way there are established resistances which tend to prevent from entering consciousness, not only the painful ideas included in the complex, proper, but also the ideas forming what may be called its *penumbra*.

If a subject fixes his mind upon a name he has had difficulty in recalling and reports all his incoming thoughts (free association), it will be found in a great many cases that the associations thus obtained lead to a group of more or less unpleasant ideas which are usually strictly excluded from the focus of his consciousness, that is, lead to a repressed complex. Ordinarily, it can then be shown that the elusive name had either formed a part of the complex itself, or else of its *penumbra*. A rule to account for many cases of difficulty in recalling familiar names (or phrases) may therefore be formulated as follows: *The name forgotten is connected (accidentally or otherwise) with a repressed complex, and is prevented from coming into consciousness by the pro-*

tective resistances against the painful ideas contained in the complex. The three examples which follow will serve to illustrate this rule.

1. During the weeks just before Christmas a gentleman was asked by two or three different people where certain books could be purchased. He happened to know that the books in question were kept in stock by a firm of publishers on Twenty-third Street, but though he recalled the exact location of this store, and was able to give accurate directions for finding it, he could not remember the name of the firm.

A few days later, when he mentioned the circumstance to me, I was able to supply the missing name (Putnam), and we attempted to analyze his forgetting, with the following results:

Upon concentrating his mind upon the name in question he immediately recalled that some years before he had gone to Putnam's in search of a certain book which he wished to present to a young lady he much admired. Having obtained the book he called upon her, but, contrary to his hopes, she received him and his gift in a manner so cold and forbidding as to occasion him not only extreme embarrassment but also a certain degree of wrath.

This memory, together with others of a similar kind which furnished mortifying evidence of his inability to win a high place in the lady's esteem, formed a complex of such an undoubtedly painful nature that one might readily suppose it capable of causing resistances against remembering that the above-mentioned firm of booksellers exists. But this complex does not account for the fact that *after* he had recalled the existence of this firm, *as* he did without apparent difficulty, the *name* of the firm still eluded him. It was evident, then, that the resistance to the name belonged to some complex still undiscovered, and I therefore urged the subject to continue his associations.

After a short pause, during which he felt that he was "thinking of nothing," he stated that he had a very vague mental picture of some person with a round, red face and wearing a blue coat, but that he was quite unable to say

who this person might be. Next he found himself thinking of a tall cupboard in a house where he had lived up to his eighth year. Then came a memory of himself as a child, sitting with his younger brother on the floor before this cupboard and playing with a colored picture-book. At this point he suddenly realized the identity of the red face. In the picture-book was a representation of General Israel Putnam, with a very red face and a very blue coat, making his famous escape from the British by riding on horseback down a flight of stone steps.

Then there occurred to the subject the incident by which the forgetting is apparently determined. When he was about seven years of age, he and his brother, stimulated by the picture of the doughty general's exploit, decided to "play Israel Putnam" by carrying each other down the stone stairs which led to the cellar of their house. But while carrying out this plan it occurred to the older boy, who at the moment was acting the part of Putnam's horse, that to drop his brother upon the stone steps would add greatly to the zest of the proceedings. This happy inspiration was no sooner received than put into effect. The small brother, suddenly finding himself at the bottom of the steps in a very contused condition, set up a wail which promptly brought the mother of the children upon the scene and placed the elder in imminent danger of chastisement. But in this emergency the same fertility of invention which got him into trouble got him out again. For by lying with great power and persuasiveness he convinced his mother that his brother's fall was purely accidental, and escaped being punished.

To this incident the forgetting of the name of Putnam may, I think, be attributed. I realize, however, that some may doubt whether the memory of this episode, though of evident significance at the time it was formed, could have any effect whatsoever after a lapse of more than twenty years. But in this connection it should be borne in mind that the memory must not be regarded as an isolated one, but as a part of great complexes which concern the telling of lies, the subject's family, and the malicious pleasure derived from making other people suffer. It is perhaps worthy of note

also, that the forgetting occurred just before Christmas — that is, in a period which sets the entire “family complex” on the *qui-vive*, and not only stimulates feelings of affection and good-will, but, because of the sometimes painful necessity of furnishing expensive material evidence of regard, occasionally inspires sentiments of a less noble and benevolent character. In view of this latter fact, one may conceive that the subject’s first association may perhaps not be so irrelevant as it seems.

2. Some time ago I was for a few days the guest of a certain married couple with whom I am intimately acquainted. One evening while my hostess, her husband, and I sat reading, she suddenly looked up from her book and asked: “Who was it that wrote ‘Paradise Lost’? Was it Dante?” Her husband replied that she had confused the authors of “Paradise Lost” and of the “Inferno,” and nothing more was said at the time. A little while later her husband left the room and, just as I was about to speak of her forgetting, she herself brought up the subject of psychoanalysis by asking me to explain a very annoying feeling which she had for some time experienced. This feeling consisted in a sense of aversion or repugnance toward all young men with light hair and blue eyes. She had been caused much discomfort by this singular antipathy as a number of her husband’s friends belonged to this type, and their frequent visits to her house always made her uneasy and unhappy. She realized perfectly that there was nothing in the character or behavior of these men to justify her peculiar feeling, but all her efforts to reason it away had been of no avail.

I told her that the generalization “*all* men with light hair and blue eyes” probably concealed thoughts and feelings which concerned one particular man of that type. At the same time I suspected, though without saying so, that the feeling of aversion very probably concealed repressed emotions of an exactly opposite character. I then asked her to fix her mind on the particular type of man she had described and to relate to me all her incoming thoughts. In response to my request she reported that she found herself thinking of a certain blond man with whom we both

were slightly acquainted; next, of another man of much the same appearance, whom, also, she knew only slightly. Then, after a short pause, she suddenly laughed, blushed, and said with some confusion, "I just now thought of some one else." "And toward him you felt no aversion?" I asked. "You are right," she replied, and then related the following.

The man she had thought of was her first cousin. He is a very handsome specimen of the blond, blue-eyed type that later inspired feelings of repulsion. When she was about sixteen years of age she had seen a good deal of this man and had found herself falling seriously in love with him. But because of their close relationship and the fact that he was nearly ten years her senior, she had decided it was very wrong in her to entertain any amorous regard for him. She had therefore resisted his attractions and endeavored to banish from her mind all sentimental thoughts concerning him. These efforts at repression were apparently successful, and, as far as she was consciously aware, he had long ceased to be of any particular significance in her emotional life. But this complex, though it had become in great part unconscious, was by no means entirely deprived of expression. For instance, when, just before her marriage, she destroyed her collection of photographs of former admirers, she "forgot" to destroy the only picture she had of her cousin.

It was not necessary for me to pursue the subject further to feel that the correctness of my suspicions in regard to the significance of her antipathy was pretty well confirmed. That is, I was convinced that her aversion to all blond, blue-eyed young men was simply an emotional over-compensation for repressed feelings of a quite different nature toward a single individual; namely, her cousin.

But the conversation in which was brought out the existence of her cousin-complex, furnished, incidentally, the explanation of her forgetting. Her inability to recall who wrote "*Paradise Lost*" depended upon this same complex — a circumstance which can be readily understood when we learn the given name of her cousin. It was Milton.

The lady's difficulty in recalling the name Milton was

particularly striking since, as she informed me later, she was a member of a literary society in which, only a few weeks before my visit, she had taken up the study of the works of Milton, including, of course, "Paradise Lost."

3. A man while describing to me a certain magazine article suddenly made the discovery that he was unable to recall the author's name. This surprised him considerably for he is not only well acquainted with this author's writings, but he even knows him personally. Upon searching his mind for the missing name there occurred to the subject the name *Weed*, which, after a moment's thought, he rejected as incorrect. The right name, which was *Wells*, he finally recalled after expending some little thought and effort.

In response to my suggestion that we attempt to analyze his forgetting, he gave free associations to the name Wells with the results that follow: It first occurred to him that a certain relative of his was named Wells D. He next thought of the story, heard many times in his boyhood, of Wells D's death. (This relative died before the patient was born.) Wells D when about thirteen years of age paid a visit to some friends in Vermont, and there for the first time saw the operations of tapping maple trees, gathering sap, and making maple sugar. Wells was greatly interested in these proceedings, and when he returned home decided to tap some maple trees on his own account. Preparatory to carrying out this plan he cut some sticks from what he fondly believed to be elder bushes, intending to make therefrom the wooden tubes, or "spiles," which in the operation of tapping are inserted into holes bored in the maple trees. But it so happened that the sticks Wells cut were not elderwood but poison sumach. Thus, when in making his spiles the boy used a red-hot iron to burn the pith out of these sticks, a most poisonous smoke was produced. Some of this he inhaled, a horrible inflammation was set up throughout his entire respiratory tract, and a few days later he died in great agony.

After concluding this narrative the subject found his mind occupied with a mental picture of Wells D's swollen and suppurating nostrils. Next there occurred to him a

conversation he had had with a woman he knew slightly, in which she described how the mucous membrane of her nose became swollen during certain attacks of hay fever to which she was subject. It also occurred to him that he had recommended to this woman that she spend the summer in a certain country city where he had once lived.

Following this association he recalled that in this country city there resided a girl in whom at one time he had been very much interested. This young lady, who was far more distinguished for her personal beauty and power of attracting than for any ethical attainments, had won for herself, through certain peculiarities in her behavior toward men, the nickname "The Clinging Vine."

The precise nature of the patient's relations with this girl it is not necessary to disclose here. Suffice it to say that the complex concerning her was one of no mean proportions, and that it contained memories both pleasant and painful.

He had not seen her for three or four years when he received a piece of news which gave him no great delight. A mutual acquaintance informed him that she had contracted gonorrhœa, and that this disease she distributed with such freedom and impartiality among the young men of her vicinity that her former nickname, "The Clinging Vine," was changed to the equally picturesque appellation "The Poison Ivy."

This latter circumstance apparently accounts for the subject's difficulty in recalling the name Wells. His complex of ideas concerning the young lady was on the whole a decidedly painful one, and had therefore been to some extent repressed. But the resistances established to prevent the Poison-Ivy-painful-inflammation theme from entering his consciousness would naturally tend to exclude the almost identical poison-sumach-painful-inflammation theme likewise. And since the name Wells was firmly fixed to this latter theme, it was necessarily excluded with it.

Now a word as to the incorrect name, Weed, which was rejected by the patient. Analytic experience has shown that the word or words which come to one's mind while searching for a forgotten name, are connected with the re-

pressed complex producing the forgetting by a chain of associations quite as perfect as that existing between the complex and the word forgotten. This is obviously true in the case at hand. The association between the words *weed* and *poison ivy* is practically an immediate one. And it may be supposed therefore that the Poison-Ivy complex might have been reached with equal readiness from either *Weed* or *Wells* as a starting point for free associations.