

Book Reviews

WIT AND ITS RELATION TO THE UNCONSCIOUS. By Professor Dr. Sigmund Freud, LL.D. Authorized English Translation, with Introduction by A. A. Brill, Ph.B., M.D. Moffat, Yard and Company, New York.

The translation of this work of Freud presents to English readers a volume of peculiar interest and importance. The subject of wit has received but scanty attention in its profounder psychology, but in Freud's hands it is subjected to that painstaking elucidation by which this author carries his reader with him into the deep recesses penetrated by his insight and thought. One is particularly impressed here with this method of research in the development of the meaning and service of wit. An appreciation is also due the translator for preserving and reproducing this same lucidity in spite of the difficulties of translation of a subject so peculiarly elusive of transference into another language.

The ultimate value of the study itself is discovered through this probing of the profound psychology of wit which thus finds its place through connection with the unconscious in the psychic economy of life.

The author devotes the first part of his study to an analysis of wit through a variety of chosen examples. These manifest the details of the technique upon which wit depends and by which it accomplishes its ends. The outer form of the wit discovers to us condensation, application of the same material, double meaning in the play upon words, arrangement and use of the material of expression, which might cause confusion in the study of wit if there were not also discoverable a unification in condensation as the chief tendency which comprises the others and which loses itself in the broader conception of "economy." The significance of the latter is left to be explained through the careful deliberation which characterizes the entire study.

Therefore the author turns first to a consideration of the technique as it concerns the inner content as well as the outward form of the wit. Here displacement is the essential element and it is active in the stream of thought itself of the witticism. Absurdity or sense in nonsense also belongs here as an important element. These are really examples of faulty thinking, which likewise expresses itself in sophistic thinking and in automatic errors of thought. It is scarcely profitable in a brief review to enumerate the variety of techniques of wit which attain their real significance only by a careful and detailed following out of the author's individual discussion of these. They lead to the recognition of the striking resemblance to the technique which Freud's investigations have revealed in the dream.

Another source of pleasure lies in the tendencies of wit. Harmless wit may be rich in content and wit activity, both of which combine to give pleasure, which is really an end which redeems even this wit from aimlessness or purposelessness. There is, however, a sense in which wit may be especially designated as tendency wit when it is used as a means to a definite end aside from this original pleasure and therefore opens up new sources of pleasure. Such wit is either hostile wit or obscene. An analysis of this form of wit prepares the way further to understanding the sources of the peculiar pleasure arising from wit.

The synthetic part of the book is concerned with the discussion of the attaining of this pleasure through psychic economy. This has to do with the external or internal hindrances or inhibitions which stand in the way of an easy attainment of pleasure. They may best be studied in the case of the tendency wit but have their place also in the pleasure in nonsense of all kinds. The retention as well as the formation of an inhibition requires a psychic expenditure. The inhibition or suppression may be that which tendency wit evades or it may be the control which reason exercises in rejecting and condemning play as senseless and absurd, and which is removed accidentally through the techniques of wit. The inhibiting or suppressing stream works against an impulse to liberate pleasure from a certain source and though it is stronger than this impulse it can not destroy it. The suppressed tendency can, however, become strengthened by the aid of wit pleasure to such an extent that it can overcome the inhibition. This liberating "fore-pleasure" thus overcomes reason and critical judgment and suppression.

There must be so complete a psychic harmony between the originator of the wit and the person to whom he imparts it that the same inhibitions are ready to be evoked in the latter on hearing the joke. The amount of psychic expenditure involved arrives, however, too late and finding itself superfluous is discharged through laughter. Meanwhile the auxiliary wit techniques divert the hearer's attention and so preserve this discharge for the wit itself in laughter. For wit seeks the shortest path of discharge expression, avoiding distracting mental effort but rather fascinating attention by its façades until the automatic discharge can take place. The wit-maker enhances his pleasure through the laughter of the hearer of the witticism. His pleasure in removing inhibitions and diminishing expenditure is not complete until it finds this discharge in the auditor.

The theoretical division of the study reveals more fully the essential relationship of wit to the dream. Freud reviews very concisely the principles of his interpretation of dreams and compares the dream mechanisms with those employed by wit. He thus locates definitely the sphere of the wit work in the unconscious. He expresses it thus comprehensively: "A foreconscious thought is left for a moment to unconscious elaboration and the results are forthwith grasped by the conscious perception." The inspirational character of wit confirms this conception.

By thus submerging the thought into the unconscious wit has recourse to the infantile sources of pleasure, which are manifest also in the forms of technique at its disposal. Its manner of obtaining pleasure here is through the economy of expenditure in inhibition. The comic and humor, to whose discussion large space is devoted, likewise derive their pleasure through the same element of economy, the latter in economy of expenditure in feeling, the former in thought. They all seek to attain again that childish state when psychic work involved but slight expenditure and thus made possible a pleasure which has been lost in the course of development.

The dream guards itself from intelligibility, for it has no social aim or purpose. Wit, on the other hand, is preëminently social and its process must be completed through at least two and often three persons. The dream, however, never loses its relation with life. It "serves preponderately to guard from pain."

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