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THE PERSONIFYING PASSION IN YOUTH
WITH REMARKS UPON THE SEX
AND GENDER PROBLEM.

THOSE who like to find in the evolution of the individual the reappearance of the stages through which the race has passed, will be disposed to look upon the remarkable tendency to personify recorded in the following pages as indicating an unusually well marked and protracted animistic stage.

Considered from the standpoint of philology, the following record will suggest the gender and sex problem.¹ Philologists have not yet come to an agreement as to the origin of the puzzling use made of gender in the naming of inanimate objects. Why, for instance, does the French say *la porte*, *la lune*, *la beauté* and *le livre*, *le soleil*, *le retour*? The plausible theory of Herder, Adelung, and Grimm—until recently without rival, but now attacked by several, Brugmann of Leipzig in particular—holds that gender in language reflects simply the tendency of the early man to personify and sexualise lifeless objects. Those giving the impression of the characteristics associated more particularly with the male sex were looked upon as masculine and designated accordingly. This theory has recently received the support of Gustav Roethe (1890).²

Many of the psychological arguments brought to bear upon the Adeling-Grimm theory by Brugmann and others lack foundation. Brugmann asserts for instance that "Grimm's theory ascribes to the Indo-Europeans a mental condition which we cannot harmonise

¹ My attention was drawn to this point by the editor of this review.

² See the Preface to the third vol. of the third edition of Grimm's Grammar.

with what we actually know of the mental life of man and of the races" . . . "for primitive man the external world was mostly matter, material, just as it is for us to-day, but to him even more so perhaps than to us." . . . "Why should one think that primitive man overloaded language with personal metaphors instead of impersonal?"¹ This is a statement which goes directly against the teachings of modern Anthropological and Child psychology. Grimm's explanation need not be interpreted as meaning that the gender differentiation had to be accompanied from the first and in every case by sexualisation. Objects may well have been personified and have received the grammatical distinctions characteristic of the male and female sex, although there has been no taking into account of physical sex; a child may personify a tree and classify it among the male or female objects, although for him physical sex does not exist. We may also take into consideration the fact that if the formal gender is not found in every language, it pervades the languages of those peoples which manifest in their religions and in their life generally a particularly strong tendency to sexual imagery, as is the case, for instance, with the Semitic family.

However this may be, the remarkable tendency of Mrs. X to personify when a child and, later on, to personify and sexualise—a tendency which in a lesser degree is not unusual in children and youth of our civilisation—will be of interest to those whose attention has been drawn to the sex and gender problem in language.

Whatever the interpretation one may place upon the disclosures here related, the glimpse of light they throw into the inner life of a person, not as unusual as most people will imagine, will no doubt be to many a revelation of the wide differences existing between individuals though they be of the same social class and civilisation. For, it must be owned that despite our increasing altruism and the realism of our novelists, playwrights, poets and painters, we still find it difficult to look upon other human beings as differing from ourselves to any considerable extent.

¹ From *The Nature and Origin of the Noun Genders in the Indo-European Languages*, a lecture translated by Ed. Y. Robbins. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1897.

At the close of the paper we have indicated the momentous influence that a personifying habit, such as is displayed by Mrs. X, must have upon religious life.

The curious associations existing in some minds between vowels and colors formed the subject of the conversation at a recent dinner at which I was a guest. Illustrations of mental forms and of pseudo-chromesthesia were given, and one of the company told of the amusing vagaries into which some French "decadent" poets had been led by a misunderstanding of the facts. He mentioned the famous *Sonnet des Voyelles* of Arthur Rimbaud; the still more surprising *Instrumentation Verbale* of René Ghil, a treatise in which the latter-day poets will find the fixed musical value of each vowel and of each consonant; and, the climax of it all, the crazed attempt of M. Rounardo and Mme. Framen de Labrély to produce a symphony not of sound only but of sensations of different kinds. As freaks of the imagination were in order, and many strange experiences were being told, our hostess said with an uneasy smile that for her neither letters nor sounds had a color value, but that the figures were either male or female and had each a well-marked individuality. There was too little encouragement in the incredulous or quizzical looks of several of those present to induce her to proceed with her revelations, but later on, in private, she readily satisfied my curiosity, and I now place her statements before the reader together with a few comments and no apology, feeling sure that a bit of individual psychology bringing to light some features of the hidden physiognomy of a fellow being can hardly be lacking in interest and may very well lead to a better understanding of those with whom, though in daily contact, we so often fail to "make connexion." What did Sentimental Tommy's teacher know of the real hero of Mr. Barrie's novel? Never once did he meet Stroke, although Tommy was in his class-room all the year round.¹

¹ A somewhat similar case will be found recorded in the *Pedagogical Seminary*, Vol. II., under the title "The Individuality of Numbers."

The lady I am writing of—let her be called Mrs. X—was not acquainted with any experience, similar to her own; moreover, she had never given a systematic account of what is related in this paper, and only rarely had she mentioned the facts in a general way, as, for instance, recently at the dinner-table. When a child, she took it for granted that there was nothing unusual in her ideas about numbers, trees, etc., and consequently did not speak of it. Occasionally when she happened to make some reference to her “old nurse”—an apple-tree peeping at night into her room—she discovered that she was not understood by her playmates and so she would say no more about it. It is only when about sixteen or seventeen years of age that Mrs. X realised clearly that her mental life differed in this respect from that of most people, but she never felt particularly uneasy on that score. It may not be useless for the writer to affirm here his confidence in the exactness of the lady's statements. She was desirous of giving a faithful account of what was wanted, a thing she is as able to do as the average person of good judgment and of culture.

“Figure One, said Mrs. X, is distinctly negative; it does not interest me, but it is a Him.”—*A Him?*¹—“Yes, he goes about in trousers. He is grown up and slender; but beyond that I never had a clear idea of what he was like.

“Two is also a man, good looking, fresh-complexioned and blonde—a commonplace person, a sort of brother to Three.”—*What do you mean by a sort of brother?*—“Well, he is a brother, but does not seem to be intimate with him; they have nothing particular to do with each other. Two is a little older than Three. I do not know about the color of his eyes.

“Three is a pretty girl about sixteen with curly hair and a rosy complexion, rather unreflective and very merry. She is perfectly devoted to Four, who makes light of her.”

“Four is a brunette, very handsome, very clever, so much more clever than Three! She is reserved; people might think of

¹ The author's queries are put in italics.

her as being haughty, but she is really very nice. I am very fond of her. For Three, she has a kind of affectionate endurance . . . you know, she is so much more clever than Three!

“As to Five, she is a very ‘frumpy’ old person, tiresome, and flavorless. She wears a wig and lives in a boarding-house. A little fat; don’t you know, a sort of figure five. It is so easy to hood-wink her; she is awfully slow of comprehension. She is always acting chaperon for the others.”—*I did not suppose there would be a call for chaperons in your figure-world?*—“Oh, yes, she accompanies the young women when they go anywhere.”

As I was taking down her last remarks, Mrs. X suddenly exclaimed in the voice of one who is making a discovery, “Isn’t it strange? It occurs to me that it is always summer. I don’t believe it ever was winter; is it not queer! Girls are always wearing summer dresses.”

Before you go on won’t you tell me whether the personality of these figures is present to your mind whenever you see or think of a number?—“As soon as I dwell an instant on them their personality materialises, but it remains unnoticed if I am in a hurry, or if the arithmetical meaning of the figures is of much concern to me, as when I have my check-book in hand. When a young girl, the human element in the digits was of more emphatic interest to me than now. It has decreased during the past six years. Perhaps this decline coincided with great sorrows I underwent at that time. Since then, I have lost much of the passionate interest I took in all kinds of people. Otherwise their personality has not changed; they remain as to age, looks, and idiosyncrasies what they always were, for I do not remember their ever being without the well-marked individuality I have been telling you about.”—*I can’t very well conceive of the way in which these figures can be said to be alive; how, when, do they get into action? This appears to me so odd that it requires a vigorous effort of my imagination to get your meaning.*—“Why, it is plain enough! For instance, if I had to make a little sum, let us say $123+456$. When those people are put like that, things will happen between them. Sometimes at school I was very much annoyed and distressed when the teacher would put

side by side people who did not belong well together ; for instance Eight and Three. I could not make the sum ; it could not be done, that is all. I must say that their doings were not quite spontaneous ; they were, in part at least, semi-consciously guided by me, somewhat as when playing with dolls. I would play with figures at times to defeat punishment, when it consisted of an arithmetical task. I have always abhorred arithmetic, as everything else demanding concentration of mind. I used to have very exciting times with my figures. But, although I might wilfully contrive happenings between them, their character was fixed and beyond my power to modify. In idle moments, and I managed to find a great many such moments, I would develop on my slate a human appearance for numbers ; and I would often feel that I was not doing justice to their characters when writing them down. But this is a digression ; I have not finished introducing you to the digits. We stopped at six.

“Six is a young man about twenty. A kind of masculine counterpart of Three, for whom he is suspected of entertaining tender feelings. His hair is curly and blonde ; he is ruddy, broad-shouldered, about five feet eleven in height—an English type. He is very fond of boating and frequently rows on the Thames.”—*Are you acquainted with London and the Thames?*—“No, I never was in England.

“Seven : a decorative old piece of bric-a-brac in the shape of a retired lawyer or something like that, tall, thin, scrupulously neat in his appearance, using beautiful English, fussy in trifling matters. A man of distinguished bearing this decorous old Seven with his thin gray hair parted in the middle and brought forward at the sides. He is always predicting the weather or some impending trouble or other ; but nobody pays the slightest attention to him or to his prognostications. When things announced have come to pass he never fails to say ‘I told you so, but you would not listen to me.’

“Eight might be looked upon as a masculine counterpart of Four. He is about twenty-eight, tall, dark, very good-looking and very clever. I have the impression that he has travelled a good

deal. He is an accomplished person; he fences, plays music, speaks several languages,—a little conceited, sarcastic, and reserved. You see, a very attractive fellow, and I must say that I am rather in love with him. He and Four distinctly care for each other, but they are always hurting each other's feelings.

“Nine is an entirely different kind of man; a hard-working, industrious, uninteresting person,—the sort of person that would be a trustee, you know: honest, intelligent, but very limited and without imagination. A good family man . . . only I don't know his family.

“The compound numbers do not have as a rule a constant personality; only a few of them have. Nineteen for instance is a good deal like Four; Twenty resembles Six, and Fifteen bears a strong likeness to Three. You see that the personality of the separate figures making up the numbers is for nothing in the results. I have no close personal interest in any of them.

“Have you noticed that all these people are gentlefolks, or have been so? Some of them have degenerated; Five for instance, for lack of means. She is always talking about the past, poor thing! She has no children.”—*It is a very interesting collection of people to have around, I am sure, but I do not yet see clearly what sort of life these people lead. What do they do?*—“Some of them are rather inactive, but that could not be said of Three, Four, Six, and Eight. I have really much affection for them; they are such rare people! What do they do? Well, they have no end of love affairs. I witness most thrilling love scenes, as detailed and distinct as in real life.”—*It goes on all the time even yet?*—“Yes, even now; is it not strange that they do not learn better! But they do not marry, and do not grow old. Their relations with each other are episodic, not continued and progressive. I was telling you that Four and Eight frequently wound each other's feelings. One of the reasons for this is that Four used to frivol with Six, a very nice young fellow but quite boyish. She does not do it as much now as in the past. Three and Six are very open in their expressions of regard; Three is so young, you know. They are often ridiculous. Three is in awe of Eight who used to tease her

good-humoredly. The love episodes are vivid enough, but brief, because I have to pass on to other things."—*Please tell me when, on what occasion, these scenes take place.*—"Without any particular occasion. They take place when I am reading in my room, or when at my desk, if my attention chances to be caught by a numeral. I often say to one or to the other of them, 'Oh, I wish you would go away, that I might do my work,' for it is as much of an interruption as if somebody were speaking to me."

Do you know whether the mood of your number-friends changes with your own humor?—"No, it does not. They are never depressed and, as I have just noticed, they enjoy continued fair weather; but what I read often suggests their actions.

"To this day I find relief in the company of these people. There are times when I say to myself, 'O that I might be left alone to live a while with my people.'" When I asked what was her relation to them, I was surprised to find that I had put an absurd question. "I have no dealings with them; of course not, I could not." And when I insisted upon having a reason, she only repeated, "I do not know why; I simply could not. It seems strange you don't understand; though of course, you cannot since you don't know them. It is like water and oil; we cannot mix."

On continuing to question, it came out that not only numerals, but also everything else, had sex and a more or less clearly marked individuality. "The minute I think about anything, it assumes personality: furniture, fruit, flowers, etc. For instance my rotating chair is a dullard; he is so slow that he often makes me impatient and I tell him 'Oh, go away, you stupid thing.' When I was in my teens this personal side of objects filled and dominated my life. Trees were particularly dear to me. But I have not yet told you that the letters of the alphabet also have personality. It is a much vaguer one than that of numbers and it is really only with the first letters of the alphabet that I am well acquainted. *A* is a dignified matron, handsome and distinguished. She lacks imagination, though. *B* is also middle aged, sometimes a man and sometimes a woman."

At this point Mrs. X, noticing that in taking down her remarks

I wrote the small letters *a*, *b*, exclaimed, "But I am speaking of capital, printed letters; only printed letters have personality. The small ones are the children of the large ones, but *a* is not necessarily the child of *A*."

"*C* is a young man, a sort of captain, gallant and daring."

As Mrs. X appeared to have little more to say about letters, I inquired why it was that they occupied so modest a place in her imaginary world. "Might it not be," she answered, "that the difficulty I experienced in learning arithmetic and my dislike for it account for the greater definiteness and wealth of meaning of the figures when compared with the letters? The very irksomeness of arithmetic drove me to dwell upon the personal side of the figures; I would thus begin to attach myself to them as I do to real persons, and they would become firmly established in my affections. It was not so with letters; the meaning of what I was reading would keep my attention and so my dreaming propensity was held in check. I do not know which were first, the number or the letter-personalities."

A while ago you mentioned your affection for trees. Tell me something about it, please?—"Yes, my dearest friends in nature are trees, apple-trees above all others. I always had a strong sense of their personality. A pale, thin tree is likely to be a woman. Tulip trees, poplars, birches, and beeches, are always women, while oaks are always masculine. Some species have men and women among them."—*And the weeping willow?*—"It is a woman, of course. Apple-trees are always old people, kindly and old. I love them, O I just love them! When we were young, my sister and I, we lived much outside, running about, climbing into trees like boys. There was behind our house a dear apple-tree for which I had a romantic attachment. It was rather hard to climb and I alone of our band of children could get into it. I had a delicious feeling that she was a strong mother caring for me and for the robin who lived in it. At night she would sometimes look into my room through the window. When sitting in this tree I would talk with her. As we went away for the winter I would leave things with her, my dominoes for instance, to keep until the next season to-

gether with the robin's nest."—*Did you care particularly for your dominoes?*—"Why, yes, a good deal. I should have told you that they were my dolls; we did not play dominoes, but dolls, with them. And, by the way, you may like to know that I always hated ready-made dolls; they looked to me so stupid. I could not do what I wanted with them, while with dominoes I could accommodate my fancy and turn them at any time into any kind of person I chose. I played dolls with dominoes until I was twelve, I believe."—*Did your friends know about the apple-tree's being a foster mother to you?*—"I hardly know, I did not think of telling them. People I did not like I would drive away from the neighborhood of the tree. I have also pleasant recollections of three plum-trees: two small ones who were the children and one large one. I would also leave things with them to keep through the winter.

"For brooks I had a particular fondness, and, strange to say, I found great delight in frightening myself with them. We spent once two months of the summer near the Connecticut River. On one side of the road leading from the house to the river and then along its banks there were cornfields, and, beyond them, marshes and a small stream. I would go to the marshes almost every evening during the two months, alone, and sit motionless, listening to the whispering voice of the wind in the corn and to the murmur of the water and then, suddenly, start for home as fast as I could run, seized with panic. And yet I knew there was no danger. I always loved solitude; whenever I could I would get off in the country alone. Nevertheless, I had very warm feelings for my brothers and sisters as well as for inanimate objects. I recall a little plaster figure that stood on the mantle-piece. When my sister broke it accidentally I secluded myself to cry, although we had never been allowed to play with it. In fact, since I am grown up I have often lamented the tenacity and the warmth of my feelings for people; they master me and stick to me even when they are no longer deserved. It is at times a heavy burden."

It will be hard for the many unimaginative, business-ridden Americans to see in a form of consciousness so different from theirs

anything more than the over-indulgence of a lively fancy, such as most of us are guilty of at some time or other during adolescence; it indicates merely an hypertrophied disposition to dreamery not worth talking about, they will say. Such an opinion falls short, it seems, of a sufficient appreciation of the case. An anthropomorphic passion such as the one revealed here is characteristic of a psychological type from which the matter-of-fact, analytical, objective, person is as far removed as one human being can well be from another of the same civilisation. No doubt Mrs. X is gifted with a riotous imagination, but, although necessary, this quality of mind is not at all adequate as an explanation; why should it spend itself in the creation of living persons out of inanimate objects? That is the trait which particularises the case of Mrs. X. It betokens, it is evident, the existence of peculiar affective forces. Under their guidance the intellect creates a world in which hard facts are but scantily represented, and yet a world potent in the formation of the person's opinions, judgments, and, most of all, in the molding of her affective attitudes towards, and reactions to, the world of objective existences.

We will not attempt to trace the influence that this mental make-up must infallibly exercise on the psychological physiognomy. It would be a task beyond the scope of this paper. Neither shall we try to adduce reasons for the connexion between specific objects and particular personalities: why seven is a "decorative old piece of bric-a-brac," why the apple-tree is a devoted foster mother, or why three and six, as also four and eight, stand for assorted couples, the smaller number being the female and its double the male, are queries of subordinate interest. Mere chance, the looks of the thing, its quality or virtue, its situation, and many other properties and contingencies, will account for these associations. We shall limit ourselves to a few considerations touching the influence of the passion of Mrs. X on her religious life.

The vividness of one's religious sentiments, and consequently the power of religion, is, at least at a certain intellectual level, closely dependent upon the ability to form and to maintain a clear apprehension of the divinity under an anthropomorphic form.

There are unfortunate persons, true lovers of virtue, who, despite the best of dispositions, are denied the benefits of religion. They know of it only what the initiated affirm to be its accessories: ethical, judicial, and æsthetic impressions and ideas, and this simply because of their deficiency in that particular kind of affective imagination with which Mrs. X appeared to be so remarkably gifted and without which the clothing of the efficient principle of the universe in human shape is hardly possible.

We thought that Mrs. X had probably been able early in life to endow the divine with a lusty personal reality and had maintained with Him a lively and continued intercourse. But this conjecture was not entirely justified by her statements concerning her childhood. She said: "I don't think I bothered with God when I was a child, except when frightened. Usually I did not care a button for Him. I would say my prayers as directed, but automatically; it meant very little to me. Only if I got into a plight I would cling with the completest faith to what I had been taught about God's power and his readiness to answer our prayers. It was then a source of great comfort to me." It is clear that God was not to her the everpresent Friend and Companion, but only a far-off, mighty, and uncongenial personage whom one lets alone as much as possible. Other beings, discerned through the physical appearance of nature, lay nearer to her heart and to her imagination, and engrossed her attention to the exclusion of God. This, after all, is perfectly natural and healthy.

When we pass from childhood to adolescence and maturity, the problem in hand assumes a highly serious aspect. Of the possible outcomes the following are worthy of consideration. She might have followed the way leading to the disintegration of the traditional feeling and willing Divinity and replaced it by impersonal cosmic forces molding the physical as well as the moral universe into an organic system. In this case, her peculiar way of reacting to her environment helping her, she might have found in the feeling of unity with the cosmos an effective religious power not very different in quality from the sense of physical and moral dependence upon God said to be the root of the religious consciousness. Or,

if this conception of the universe was not within her possibilities, the criticism, unavoidable at her stage of culture, threatening destruction to an anthropomorphic Divinity, might have been held in abeyance by her love for the personal and her thirst for intercourse with feeling and willing creatures. In this latter case she would present the instructive and not infrequent spectacle of a person thrusting back light to keep possessions accounted dear. A person with the psychic endowment of Mrs. X might do this successfully, provided scientific training had not strengthened beyond control the need for clear conceptions and the habit of facing all problems irrespective of their affective consequences to one's self. The advantage to her of this insecure position is that she would escape the pathetic torments endured by many sensitive and religiously inclined souls. In this connexion one is reminded of the case of the unfortunate Romanes.

These and similar thoughts having crossed our mind, we could not refrain from asking Mrs. X to let us peep into her religious consciousness, and as we had a set of printed questions prepared for an investigation in the field of religion, we handed her a copy of these. Many devout people had found no objection whatsoever to answering them. When she had read the first queries and had fully grasped their purpose, she recoiled in evident distress. Her confused apologetic refusal implied that she did not dare look her beliefs squarely in the face; only to think of it threw her into a panic. When asked how this was, she made no difficulty in acknowledging that inquisitiveness in this part of her life might mean death to many a cherished and indispensable persuasion.

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