

## GOETHE'S EARLIEST RECOLLECTION

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Goethe begins his autobiography (4) with an early recollection. We shall in the present paper interpret this recollection in the Adlerian sense (1, pp. 351-357), and in the manner in which Adler would have done it, and then make a brief comparison with an interpretation by Freud.

The third paragraph of the autobiography begins with the words:

When we attempt to recall what befell us in the earliest period of youth, we are apt to confound what we have been told by others with what we remember from our own experience.

This is very true but irrelevant when we intend to work out the narrator's style of life, which is our purpose here. Goethe continues:

Without, therefore, attempting an exact investigation of the sources of my recollections—in any case a profitless task—I know as a fact that we lived in an old house, which really consisted of two adjoining houses that had been thrown into one.

The narrator does not yet come to the real point, but the fact which he chooses to mention lets us understand that his early existence was favored by material well-being. We shall look out for persons and movements to be mentioned.

A turret-like staircase led to rooms on different levels, and the unevenness of the storeys was remedied by steps.

Here a movement is implied: an easy going from one story to another.

For us children, . . .

The previously used pronoun "we" referred to all the family who lived in that large house; now the account narrows down to the children. So he was not an only child. He goes on to say:

. . . a younger sister and myself, the favorite resort was the spacious entrance-hall where, by the side of the front door, was a large wooden lattice through which we had direct communication with the street and the open air.

This description of things visible indicates that the author is a visual type and is looking outwards. There seem to be no harsh con-

flicts with members of the family, or they would have been expressed or hinted at in some way or another.

Of . . . our neighbours . . ., three brothers von Ochsenstein, the surviving sons of the deceased Schultheiss [chief magistrate of the town], lived opposite us; they became fond of me, and frequently showed their interest by playing with me or poking fun at me.

All this is not yet a particular early recollection. Goethe notes, however, the attention which he received from grown-up neighbors. This must have been important for him. Beginning with "our" neighbors he ends this sentence with "me," this word occurring three times. Had he lost some attention of his mother when after having been the only son a sister was born? He goes on:

My relatives . . .

So there must have been grandparents or uncles and aunts as a fortunate extension of the narrower circle of the family.

. . . were fond of narrating all sorts of pranks which these solitary and otherwise sober-minded men put into my head. I will give an instance.

The responsibility for initiating pranks is put upon the others; however, it seems that now we come to a point which may reveal more of the author than that he is a well-to-do visual type who seems to have developed his social relationships without particular conflicts and who adopts the quasi-scientific attitude of an observer and reporter, aware, however, of his own importance.

#### THE PARTICULAR INCIDENT

A crockery fair had just been held, and not only had the immediate needs of the kitchen been supplied, but miniature articles of the same ware had been purchased as playthings for us children.

This confirms what we already guessed about a certain harmony in the family atmosphere.

One fine afternoon, when everything was quiet in the house . . .

This quietness may have been perceived as a contrast to the usually prevailing conversations and noises. Its being mentioned here suggests that the writer also has acute hearing. He seems to be alone in that vast house. Goethe goes on:

. . . I was amusing myself with my pots and dishes . . .

The pots and dishes were first mentioned as "playthings for us children." We should think they were more particularly toys of the

girl training for her later function as a housewife. Now we read, "my pots and dishes!"

. . . and not knowing what to do next, I hurled one of my toys into the street.

Again, "my toy." And why does he hurl *his* piece of crockery in the street and thus break the object with which he had just been amusing himself? This might make sense if he felt neglected, the mother having perhaps gone out with the younger sister. So in breaking a toy which was rather *hers* he would get even with her. We read on:

The von Ochsensteins, who saw my delight at the fine crash it made, and how I clapped my hands for joy, cried out, 'Another'!

These men saw his delight at the fine crash; again, the poet's acute awareness of both visual and acoustic events is expressed.

Now the boy had secured both the missed attention and a desired applause. Would he follow the suggestion and break more of "his" toys? As they may rather be those of his sister he might not mind; indeed, Goethe goes on:

Without delay I flung out a pot, and as they went on calling for more, by degrees the whole collection, platters, pipkins, mugs and all, were dashed upon the pavement. My neighbours [who had before been "our" neighbours!] continued to express their approbation, and I was highly delighted to give them pleasure.

To gain applause for giving pleasure appears here as the narrator's main purpose. We read on:

But my stock was exhausted, and still they shouted, 'More!' I ran, therefore, straight to the kitchen, and brought thence the earthenware plates which as they smashed naturally afforded a still more lively spectacle; . . .

Suppose that either the von Ochsensteins or the Goethes were very poor people; then what is related here as a funny event would be tragic.

. . . and so I kept running backwards and forwards, fetching all the plates I could reach from where they stood in rows on the dresser.

We note here the intensity of the movements, to and fro, which suggests that the narrator enjoyed movement as a means to see, hear, and get applause for extraordinary actions. We remember that Goethe became a great traveler in search of visual beauty, in Dresden, Strasbourg, and Italy, as he reports later in great detail.

But as that did not satisfy my "audience" [a word from the vocabulary of the dramatic poet and theater director], I devoted all the ware that I could lay hands on to similar destruction.

These words remind us of the director's lines spoken to the poet in the "Prelude in the Theater" to *Faust*, Part I.

... take occasion by the hair,  
For, once involved in the affair,  
You'll carry on because you must.  
The German stage lets each try what he may;  
Then spare me nothing, on our special day (3, p. 27).

Goethe concludes the report of what he has selected to tell us as his first recollection by saying:

Not till later did any one appear to hinder and restrain. The mischief was done, and to compensate for much broken crockery, there was at any rate an amusing story, in which the mischievous authors took special delight to the end of their days.

Once more the narrator thus expresses his satisfaction of having greatly delighted his public. This is the guiding fiction behind the behavior pattern in which seeing, hearing, and moving about are outstanding features.

The writer believes that his interpretation of Goethe's first recollection would have been the same even if he had not since his teens known and loved Goethe. It can be shown that the life style revealed here prevails in all the writings, autobiographical, epic, dramatic, and lyric, of the sage of Weimar.

#### FREUD'S INTERPRETATION

As early as 1917 Freud (2) wrote a paper about this childhood recollection of Goethe. Freud held that for a depth-psychologically uninformed reader "A mischievous trick with bad results for the household economy, carried out under the spur of encouragement by strangers, is certainly not a fitting vignette for all that Goethe has to tell us of his full life" (2, p. 359).

For Freud this is a screen memory. The Adlerian approach which takes the incident as a significant sample of behavior uses all that is given in the recollection and tries to empathize with it as fully as possible. Freud does not do this. He is quite detached, uses only those parts of the recollection which are important for his hypothesis, generalizes from what he believes to have noted in some other people, and adds to this some further outside information. In this way he arrives at the conclusion that Goethe in this recollection actually expresses the wish to get rid of a baby brother by a magic action, probably the brother born when Goethe was a little over three years old. As is well known, Goethe had a sister, Cornelia, born 15 months

after him. But four additional siblings were born after her, none of whom survived. Freud explains:

This 'Out with it!' seems to be an essential part of the magic action and to arise directly from its hidden meaning. The new baby must be *thrown out*, through the window, perhaps because he came through the window. The whole action would thus be equivalent to the familiar things said by children who are told that the stork has brought a little brother or sister. 'Then the stork is to take it away again' is the verdict (2, p. 363).

To fit this notion of sibling rivalry, Freud concentrates on merely the act of throwing crockery out of the window and disregards the manner, the spirit, and the setting in which this was done—all aspects which we have pointed out in the preceding. Many people are jealous of their siblings. Having found that a number of his patients who were jealous in this way had indeed thrown things out of the window, and having interpreted this as a symbolic act of getting rid of the rival, Freud put Goethe's recollection in the same bed of Procrustes while there was actually no evidence of an existing rivalry.

Adler in his individualizing approach always insisted that when two people do the same it does not necessarily mean the same. He treated a recollection as a sample of the individual's behavior and tried to see it as completely as possible with all its concrete interrelations and interactions, as we have attempted to do here. Thus our interpretation is individualizing, or idiographic, whereas Freud's is, within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, generalizing, or nomothetic.

#### SUMMARY

The earliest recollection given by Goethe in his autobiography reveals an interest in delighting an audience, and emphasis on visual, auditory, and kinetic activity, all of which seems quite consistent with the life of the great poet, statesman, and dramatist. Comparing this Adlerian interpretation with that by Freud of the same recollection brings out the difference between the two approaches.

#### REFERENCES

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