Brit. J. Psychiat. (1965), **111**, 1111–1118

Cryptomnesia and Plagiarism

By F. KRÄUPL TAYLOR

Cryptomnesia belongs to the category of psychiatric terms which acquired a bad reputation and nearly passed into obsolescence. Its disrepute has come from its popularity with people who are believers in psychic forces, spiritualism, vitalism and other supernatural agencies. Such people have used it to denote the apparent ability of some mediums to become aware, when they are in a trance, of "hidden" memories—hidden in the sense of being inaccessible to them in their normal consciousness.

Believers in spiritualism are convinced that trance mediums can thus reproduce the memories of dead people and the languages of past civilizations. More sober students of cryptomnesic phenomena discount such beliefs and prefer instead what one may call pre-Freudian psychoanalytic explanations. They believe in the existence of memories in the unconscious mind which can be recalled only in trance states or deliria, when the repressive barriers between conscious and unconscious areas of the mind are partly lifted.

Flournoy (4), for instance, referred to the case of an uneducated and almost illiterate young woman who, in a febrile delirium, uttered long sentences in ancient Greek and Hebrew. It was discovered that she had once been a maid in the house of a scholar who was apparently in the habit of loudly declaiming passages in ancient Greek and Hebrew. It was assumed that rote memories of those phrases had been retained in her unconscious mind and were reactivated during her delirium.

The account of a more recent example of a reputedly spiritualistic cryptomnesia was given in a book by Bernstein (1, 6), called *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. It related how, in 1952, a 30-year-old American housewife by the name of Mrs. Virginia Tighe was put into a hypnotic trance. To everyone's surprise, she began to talk in an Irish brogue about a previous incarnation, when she had lived in Ireland and had been called Bridey Murphy. In subsequent hypnotic trances, she talked about many incidents which had happened in her former life and seemed authentic. Yet Mrs. Virginia Tighe had never been to Ireland in her life.

The book about her became a best-seller and much public interest was stirred up. Reporters were sent to Ireland to find out whether the story about Bridey Murphy could be true. Their search was, however, unsuccessful.

There were other reporters who sensed that there might be some news value in a psychoanalytic interpretation of Mrs. Virginia Tighe's cryptomnesia. They made enquiries in the part of Chicago where she had been brought up. Before long, they found that she had been well acquainted with the family of an Irish woman whose maiden name had been Bridie (with an "ie") Murphy. Little Virginia had also been known as a talented actress who could assume a heavy Irish brogue to amuse her audience.

These examples make it clear why medical opinion looked askance on cryptomnesic manifestations produced in trance states and other conditions of altered consciousness. As a field of study, it was too full of uncertainties, self-deceptions, fraud and histrionics.

In an attempt to salvage the term *cryptomnesia* for medical usage, its meaning was changed so that no hint of any connection with spiritualist beliefs or trance states was left. It now denotes the presence of phenomena in normal consciousness which objectively are memories, but subjectively are not recognized as such. They may thus be wrongly experienced by a person as novel and original creations of his mind. Cryptomnesia can then become unintended plagiarism.

All recent specialist dictionaries contain some

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variant of this denotation. In H. C. Warren's *Dictionary of Psychology* (17), for instance, the definition of cryptomnesia runs: "A condition of memory in which the original experiences are forgotten because of unconscious motives and consequently appear as apparently new creations lacking the attributes of memory." In H. B. and A. C. English's *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms* (3) we find: "Apparently creative thinking in which organized ideas from past experience seem to be novel. The past experience itself is not recalled and may be unrecallable or repressed."

In this second definition, a useful distinction is made between experiences and their component ideas. An experience is, strictly speaking, the experience by a person of a specific occasion in his life. Each occasion consists of a unique system of simultaneous and consecutive events. Most of the events have occurred on many past occasions and are thus represented in memory as familiar ideas which need not be mnestically linked with any particular occasion. An occasion is experienced as something that is unique because it occurs at a particular period in time. Events, on the other hand, are usually experienced as phenomena that are ordinary and commonplace, unless they are new events, like an unexpected happening, a piece of interesting news or an entertaining anecdote.

The memories of occasions and of events have different fates, and it is therefore useful to distinguish them by the use of separate technical terms. The memory of occasions has been called a "reminiscence" (or "recollection") and the general memory of events, a "logical memory".

The reminiscence of occasions soon disintegrates and tends to slip from memory because the logical memories of the component events cut adrift. It is therefore usually hard to answer the question: "What happened on such and such an occasion?", if the occasion lies some weeks or months back in time. On the other hand, the logical memory of some component events is stable and enduring because it corresponds to a system of ideas whose organization has become firmly established. There are, of course, also logical memories, especially those referring to new events, which are as liable as reminiscences to suffer from the distorting influences of forgetting and the obscuring forces of repression. The fact that reminiscences and logical memories have undergone significant changes need not be subjectively realized. They may still be subjectively regarded as true, when they have objectively already turned into distorted paramnesias.

When the logical memories of the component events of an occasion are no longer recognized as associated with the reminiscence of that occasion, a condition of *partial cryptomnesia* may be said to prevail. As in a fully established condition of cryptomnesia, the reminiscence of the original occasion is not recalled (at least not in connection with the logical memories of some component events) and may be completely unrecallable and repressed. Yet the organized ideas deriving from the past experience of an occasion do not seem novel to the subject and are recognized by him as logical memories. What appears novel to him is the linking of the logical memories of two events; this appears novel because he can no longer recall the reminiscence of the occasion, when the two events had occurred together.

Partial cryptomnesia gives rise occasionally to embarrassing social consequences. This happens especially when a particular social occasion is no longer recognized as having occurred at the same time as some other event. As a result one may relate the other event to members of the past social situation who had experienced the event themselves, tell them a piece of news which they first mentioned to us on a past occasion, or entertain them with the same anecdote twice in succession.

We have probably all been guilty of such partially cryptomnesic blunders at one time or another. People who suffer from a dysmnesic syndrome are liable to commit such blunders more often and more blatantly because their reminiscences decay with such pathological speed. A senile person may thus become an insufferable bore, when he repeatedly buttonholes the same victims to regale them with the same stale story.

When an event consists of information about some original creation in the world of art, literature and thought, and the logical memory

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of the event has deteriorated to the point at which the information is no longer recognized as a memory, cryptomnesia may give rise to *unintended plagiarism*. This happens when the logical memory is activated fortuitously or by some mental scanning process so that the information appears in consciousness as a cryptomnesically unfamiliar train of thought whose originality and value is appreciated. The train of thought may then be proudly, though mistakenly, claimed as a personal creation.

Incidents of unintended plagiarism are not infrequent in daily life, though they do not often arouse controversies about priority. It is said, for example, of some people in authority that they are in the habit of rejecting the solution of a problem when it is first suggested to them, only to come out with the same solution some time later, claiming personal credit for having thought of it first and being genuinely unaware of having been guilty of plagiarism.

Creative thinkers are by no means immune against unintended plagiarism. Freud quoted an example (5) in which he was the guilty party. It upset the already fading friendship with the Berlin physician, Fliess. When Freud told him of his latest discovery that every individual was initially bisexual, Fliess reminded him of an occasion two years before, when he had mentioned this discovery to Freud. But Freud had rejected it then. The reminiscence of that occasion came back to Freud the following week. "It is painful to have to surrender one's originality in this way" was his rueful remark.

Jung dealt with cryptomnesia and unintended plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation (10, 11). He had discovered an example of it in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It concerned the following passage: "Now about the time that Zarathustra sojourned on the Happy Isles, it happened that a ship anchored at the isle on which the smoking mountain stands, and the crew went ashore to shoot rabbits. About the noontide hour, however, when the captain and his men were together again, they suddenly saw a man coming towards them through the air, and a voice said distinctly: 'It is time! It is high time!' But when the figure drew close to them, flying past quickly like a shadow in the direction of the volcano, they recognized with the greatest dismay that it was Zarathustra. . . . 'Behold,' said the old helmsman, 'Zarathustra goes down to hell.'"

Jung recalled that a very similar incident had been reported in a Swabian ghost story by Kerner, a German physician and poet. "The four captains and a merchant, Mr. Bell, went ashore on the island of Mount Stromboli to shoot rabbits. At three o'clock they mustered the crew to go aboard, when, to their inexpressible astonishment, they saw two men flying rapidly towards them through the air. . . . They came past them very closely, in the greatest haste, and to their utmost dismay descended amid the burning flames into the crater of the terrible volcano, Mount Stromboli. They recognized the pair as acquaintances from London." When the travellers had returned to London, they learned that the two acquaintances had died. They therefore formed the belief that Stromboli was the entrance to hell.

There can be no doubt that Nietzsche did not deliberately plagiarize Kerner. Jung came to the conclusion that Nietzsche had come across the passage by Kerner in his youth. Twenty years later, when he wanted to write about Zarathustra's journey to hell, the logical memory of the passage was cryptomnesically activated, and not recognized as a memory. Jung pointed out that the reproduced story showed the typical signs of unintended plagiarism: it repeated the general trend of the original story and included some unimportant details, such as the shooting of the rabbits. But the literary style and the choice of words were quite different in the two versions.

Cryptomnesia may also cause authors to duplicate unwittingly their own creative work because they no longer have a logical memory of it, and of the time and effort spent to complete it. One cannot speak of plagiarism then, since one cannot misappropriate one's own property. It is quite likely that this effect of cryptomnesia is not uncommon, though I have not yet found a published illustration. I can only quote a personal experience for which, however, I have to rely entirely on a reminiscence because I

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cannot support its accuracy any more by producing chapter and verse. When I was occupied with the task of analysing sociometric data obtained from therapeutic groups, it occurred to me one day that it was possible to measure the extent to which a group member was correctly aware of his varying private popularity with different individuals in the group (15, 16). Some time later, when throwing away previous drafts of sociometric considerations, I noticed to my surprise that I had already worked out the way of obtaining these measurements and had even started to calculate the relevant coefficients from the sociometric data of several therapeutic groups. I no longer had an inkling of this previous work when I duplicated it later on.

The literary world has very occasionally been startled by instances of *verbatim plagiarism*, when long prose passages or whole poems by one author were duplicated by another author word for word or with only minor alterations to allow for the new context. The plagiarist may be a person of high standing in the world of *belles-lettres* who has no need to steal literary property. When such a person indignantly repudiates charges of deliberate plagiarism, we are prepared to believe him. But we are then confronted with the awkward task of having to explain the coincidence of identical wording.

The coincidence cannot be due to chance, for the probability of two authors choosing independently the same sequence of words in a long verbal passage is so remote that it can be excluded from practical consideration. Nor can we essay an explanation based on the cryptomnesia of logical memories because these convey only the general meaning or argument of a verbal passage. Verbatim knowledge presupposes a rote memory of the actual sequence of words. This, in its turn, presupposes that the innocent cryptomnesic plagiarist had been so interested in the actual sequence of words that they turned into rote memories.

Rote memories are distinguished from logical memories because they can be memories of words which have no meaning since they are not associated with ideas in a particular person's mind. However, there is always a desire to endow such nonsense words with meaning. This is perhaps one of the main attractions of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. The search for meaning may even have the effect of altering some senseless verbal rote memories, such as in a child's Lord's Prayer which ran: "Our Father which art in heaven, Harold be thy name . . .".

By making senseless rote memories meaningful, a link is achieved with logical memories. It is thus at least conceivable that a cryptomnesic reappearance of logical memories could manifest itself with the verbatim accuracy of the linked rote memory. This might partly explain a case of unintended verbatim plagiarism in a person who is known to have a retentive rote memory for verbal sequences in which he is specially interested. But there are usually other possible and plausible solutions. There have been, to my knowledge, only two instances of unintended verbatim plagiarism in which definite attempts have been made to clarify the mystery.

The first concerns Siegfried Jacobsohn, an editor on the staff of the Berlin weekly, *Welt am Montag*, who was then a young theatre critic of great ability and promise, though his left-wing views and his outspoken condemnation of hack-journalism had made him many enemies. In 1904, when he was still only twenty-three, he was publicly accused of verbatim plagiarism. An Austrian journalist, Gold, wrote in the *Berliner Tageblatt* that Jacobsohn had made verbatim use of a theatre review Gold had published in 1897 about Sudermann's play "Magda" (or "Heimat" as it was originally called) and about Eleanora Duse in the title role. In September, 1904, Jacobsohn had used twelve lines of Gold's in an article on the acting of the Duse in the same Sudermann play; and, in November, 1904, he had used another eight lines to describe another play and another actor.

Jacobsohn's enemies had a field day. But the spitefulness of their attack and Jacobsohn's obvious professional integrity prompted some well-known writers to rally to his support. Foremost among them were Maximilian Harden, the founder and editor of the influential political and literary magazine, *Die Zukunft* (in which, incidentally, Jung published his paper on cryptomnesia in 1905), and Arthur

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Schnitzler, the Viennese physician, playwright and novelist (who is perhaps best remembered today for his play "Der Reigen" because it has been turned into the film "La Ronde").

Schnitzler (13) remarked that "a case like that of Jacobsohn had, to my knowledge, never been published before, nor even observed". This very singularity seems to have contributed to his inability to acquit Jacobsohn of the charge of deliberate plagiarism. "He must have known with absolute certainty that his offence against literary property would not remain either unknown or uncriticized for long. If he was nevertheless guilty of the offence, there is only one explanation: a temporary failure of judgment through a mental aberration." Schnitzler believed that the mental aberration was "something that was the opposite of the clinical picture of hypochondriasis"; something that we might today call hypomania. His verdict may perhaps be summed up as one of diminished responsibility through hypomanic over-confidence and carelessness. There was, however, no corroborative evidence for this diagnosis of a mental aberration.

Harden (7) went much further in Jacobsohn's defence. He mentioned that there were passages of verbatim plagiarism in the writings of some very well-known authors, such as Lessing, Strindberg and d'Annunzio. But they had had no enemies to accuse them. Jacobsohn had enemies and they had condemned him out of hand, though he had strongly denied the charge. Harden could not believe that Jacobsohn was guilty. "If someone is capable of good judgment and good writing, he does not have to plagiarize. Should he yet do it in a moment of weakness, or on a day of weariness, then he would also be shrewd enough to prevent detection. More plagiarizing is done every day than is suspected by the innocent; but the evidence is always carefully obliterated."

Jacobsohn had the faithful verbal rote memory which is a prerequisite of unintended verbatim plagiarism. He said of himself: "In my memory, whose strength and reliability almost everybody notices who comes into contact with me for a while, there lie words, images, sentences and whole passages from other authors which are aroused by the slightest association." Harden confirmed this: "I have often heard him, in the course of a general conversation, recite verbatim whole passages from old reviews by Mauthner whom he fervently admires."

But how did it happen that some sentences by the Austrian journalist, Gold, who was not a writer of exceptional merit, became so strongly imprinted in Jacobsohn's memory. Harden asked Jacobsohn and obtained this reply: "I myself can only speculate. When Gold was in Berlin, we saw each other quite often. When he was ill in the Moabit Hospital, I visited him as frequently as his condition and my time permitted, and brought him books. He also knew the strength of my memory . . . His old article about the Duse was then about the first piece of his I read. Of course, it was of unusual interest to me finally to learn something about the literary ability of a man whom I had known for so long. Perhaps this was the reason why my memory retained these sentences with such unfortunate accuracy." Harden added: "I cannot believe that he stole from a poorer man of whom he must have known: he is my friend no longer and watches me with suspicion."

Harden concluded with the words: "I cannot prove Jacobson's innocence . . . I can only say that his guilt has not been proved either, and is not even probable."

Here the story must rest for lack of further evidence. But one postscript is possible. Jacobsohn remained an expert in "the gentle art of making enemies" (far more apparently than Whistler himself). In 1913, he could still complain (9): "I have been persecuted with unusual spite for twelve and a half years." Mass circulation papers still refused his reviews, and the old story of his plagiarism had become so inflated that he was described as "a man of fabulous memory. In the past, he managed to write a book which was a marvel of memory power: it contained verbatim reviews composed by a dozen authors years before." Yet in spite of the watchfulness of his many enemies, no further evidence of plagiarism by him ever came to light.

The second example of unintended verbatim plagiarism was a case of "twin poems". They

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were written respectively by Mr. Clifford Dyment and Miss V. Sackville-West. The "coincidence" was first brought to public notice in a letter by Mr. L. Hickman (8) to the *New Statesman*, in which it appeared on 21 January, 1950. It was accompanied by a letter from each of the two poets, who had been invited to comment. The story was more fully examined afterwards by Mr. Robin Skelton (14), a lecturer in English at Manchester University, who obtained additional information and published it, together with his assessment, as part of his book *The Poetic Pattern* (1956).

The available evidence points clearly to Dyment as the original author of the poem. He called it "Saint Augustine at Thirty-Two". Its theme is St. Augustine's renunciation of the pleasures of the secular world, though his resolution falters when temptation assails him. The last verse (in its original version) runs:

> "I crave eloquence that is not words,
> I crave fulfilment in the kiss of stone—
> And you, you come with your lips and your gold hair
> and at your feet is a leaf that the wind has blown."

Experts agree that, in style and metre, the poem is "a particularly typical Dyment". In a letter to the Manchester lecturer, Dyment remarks that he can recall the way in which the theme of the poem occurred to him. He also has a reminiscence of the creative work involved in shaping the poem: "I also remember that to get this experience made concrete in words was long and difficult." Although, theoretically speaking, such a reminiscence might not be veridical, there is no indication here of anything that might throw doubt on its essential correctness.

In Dyment's reminiscence, the poem was written "in the early years of the war". It was first published in a magazine in January, 1943, and a second time, with some changes, in a book of Dyment's poems in 1944. This book was reviewed by Sackville-West who wrote to Dyment on 8 November, 1944: "I do not know if it would amuse you to know the [poems] which appealed to me most, but here they are: . . . Also St. Augustine at Thirty-Two, which I thought was really very beautiful."

In 1949, Sackville-West was asked by the *Poetry Review* for some unpublished verses of hers. She looked through her MSS. book and found a poem entitled "The Novice to her Lover". It was published by the *Poetry Review* in the summer of 1949.

The theme of this poem is slightly different from the theme of Dyment's poem in that the person of St. Augustine is replaced by that of a novice in a religious house. In its verbal structure, Sackville-West's poem is almost identical with the original version of Dyment's poem which contained 100 words. Eighty-seven of them reappear in exactly the same order in the twin poem. In the last verse, for instance, there are only four deviations: the "crave" in the second line has become "seek"; the words "and", "lips", and "gold" in the third line have become "but", "mouth", and "dark".

In November, 1949, Sackville-West borrowed a recent book of Dyment's poems in which "St. Augustine at Thirty-Two" again appeared. She immediately recognized its near-identity with her own poem and wrote to Dyment about it. In reply, she was reminded that she had reviewed the poem five years before, that it had appealed to her and that she had written to say so. All this had completely slipped her memory.

Sackville-West's reminiscences were vague. She believed she had written her poem "The Novice to her Lover" in 1942 or early 1943, but she had no memory of actually having composed it. She seems to have inferred the dates from her knowledge that the novice she had had in mind was St. Thérèse of Lisieux about whom she had written an essay that appeared in 1943. She also made the following remarks: (1) "I would certainly have sent [the poem] to [a close friend and devotee of St. Thérèse] as soon as written, probably the same day." (2) "I expect that before sending off my letter to her, I copied the poem into my MSS. book." (3) The inspiration for the form of the poem came from a letter from the friend "in which she said something about a leaf blowing about and that started me off with the last line which made the foundation for the whole rather peculiar metre". She also mentioned that she had been in touch with her

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friend and had received an assurance that no third party had ever seen the poem.

Yet there still remained some uncertainties. Sackville-West had been asked to ascertain from her friend the date of receiving the poem, but this question was never answered. Nor was it ever established that the poem about St. Thérèse, composed in 1942/43, was indeed the twin poem. One is inclined to think that it was not, since, in 1944, when Sackville-West came across Dyment's poem, she did not claim it as her own, whereas, in 1949, she did so immediately.

Sackville-West explained this last paradox by saying that her memory was very erratic. She differed in this respect from Jacobsohn who had been able to claim an exceptionally good memory in order to explain his verbatim plagiarism. But persons with an erratic memory are often in the habit of writing down what they want to remember. Could the key to the puzzle of the twin poems perhaps lie here?

Miss A. C. Boyd (2), in a letter to the *New Statesman*, suggested such a solution. Sackville-West must have read the first version of Dyment's poem, when it was first published in January, 1943. "She likes it, and makes a rough copy of it which she puts away amongst her papers and forgets about. In 1944, when the poem reappears . . ., she does not 'recognize her own work' *because it is not her own work* but simply a poem that, once again, appeals to her. But in 1949 she does recognize it because, in the meantime, she has, in all good faith, published it believing it to be her own—she finds the copy amongst her MSS., the theme has always meant something special for her, she not unnaturally assumes that here is something she had written several years previously."

This solution, or something close to it, seems indeed the most likely explanation. Yet Sackville-West rejected it. She did indeed copy poems by other people into a "commonplace book", but Mr. Dyment's poem was not in it. She also had a MSS. book for her own poems. About this she said: "I use this book rather vaguely, either for scribbling down ideas for poems, or for *making a fair copy of something I might have made a draft of, on some odd bit of paper*." (Italics added.)

Robin Skelton accepted this information as proof against Miss Boyd's suggested solution. However, considering Sackville-West's erratic memory and the vague way in which she used her MSS. book, the information may also be regarded as favouring Miss Boyd's solution. Dyment's poem might easily have been copied on some odd piece of paper that vaguely found its way into the MSS. book and was eventually copied into it with some alterations. The verbatim plagiarism was unintended, yet it did not originate in cryptomnesia.

Summary

The term "cryptomnesia" signifies the existence of memories which are hidden from consciousness. Originally, it was assumed that cryptomnesic memories could only be remembered in states of altered consciousness. Today, the term is used to denote the appearance in normal consciousness of memories which are not recognized as such subjectively.

In analysing cryptomnesic phenomena, a distinction is made between memories of specific occasions in a person's life, called "reminiscences", and the general memories of discrete events composing specific occasions, called "logical memories".

When the logical memories of events which occurred on a specific occasion are no longer remembered as joint components of a reminiscence, a state of "partial cryptomnesia" exists. Thus a social situation and another event may still be recognized as memories, but not as the memories of events which occurred together. This can lead to social embarrassment, such as when a piece of news is related again to the person from whom it had come originally, or when it is related twice to the same company in relatively quick succession—symptoms which can be particularly noticeable in patients with a dysmnesic syndrome.

Cryptomnesia can give rise to unintended plagiarism, especially when logical memories are no longer recognized as memories, but are experienced as newly created ideas. In the field of literature, the characteristics of this kind of plagiarism are, according to Jung, repetition of the general trend of a story, including some

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unimportant details, but in phrases which differ from the original ones.

Unintended verbatim plagiarism is a rare occurrence. It could be caused by cryptomnesia in persons with an excellent verbal rote memory. Two possible instances are described in detail. Cryptomnesia may have been responsible in one case, but careless filing of a copied poem is the more likely explanation in the other.

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(*Received 18 December, 1964*)

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.111.480.1111 Published online by Cambridge University Press