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The Phantom Double in Pregnancy

By W. B. McCONNELL

To see a ghost is a most impressive experience, but if the apparition is the observer's double the event must have added impact. The dramatic appeal of such a situation has long been exploited by authors and it would seem that their preoccupation has in some cases been dictated by personal experience, for example Maupassant and Dostoevsky (Coleman, 1934).

Whilst autoscopy has intrigued writers and poets for many centuries, scientific appraisal of the phenomenon is quite recent. This neglect may have been due to the lack of diagnostic or prognostic significance of the complaint which denies it any utility. However, recent detailed analyses have produced hypotheses to explain this and some related phenomena (Todd and Dewhurst, 1955; Lukianowicz, 1958). It is not proposed to add to these analyses but to present aspects of a case of autoscopy occurring during pregnancy, an association which has not been previously reported in the literature.

Case History

A 31-year-old housewife presented when 27 weeks pregnant with complaints of restlessness and voices debating in her head. These symptoms had commenced one month before she conceived.

When seen she had been married 10 years and had a 7-year-old daughter. This previous pregnancy was unplanned and had occurred in spite of contraception which had been employed because of the patient's dread of labour. Delivery had been uneventful but a delayed postpartum haemorrhage followed. Subsequently her fear of pregnancy increased and she steadfastly refused to contemplate having further children, contrary to her husband's expressed desires. During his frequent absences from home the patient brooded on her loneliness and eventually consulted her doctor who, she said, encouraged her to have further children. This advice was ignored, but 4 years later, when she again complained of "depression", it was repeated and this time reluctantly accepted. Almost immediately she conceived, but instead of improving became tense, anxious, restless and unable to stay in the house because of the silence. At this stage "the voices" commenced. Three voices, all easily recognized as her own, argued and debated random topics or snatches of conversation. Thoughts sometimes "came out through her head" and often the words heard would flash across her eyes.

On admission to hospital she recounted this history with an indifferent attitude, in a composed, calm, relaxed manner, as if acting a part. Some days later, with a show of worry, she complained that rats and other animals were coming towards her, but these additional symptoms soon disappeared.

Some few weeks after admission a new symptom was related. She had suddenly seen a vision of herself which was fleeting and caused her considerable amazement. She described it thus:

"I see myself just as I am, in the clothes I'm wearing. It comes out of the blue when I least expect it and it would stagger you. It's the front view as if in a mirror. It's just a second or two. I turn away quickly whenever I see it and when I look back it's gone. It's just me and I don't do a thing."

In the following weeks as an in-patient the spectre reappeared frequently, dressed exactly as the patient, the clothing being fully coloured. It was solid and objects could not be seen through it. She felt it belonged to her and was under her complete control, though it would appear unexpectedly. No movement or action was carried out, but the apparition would stand just ahead with its face showing the patient's feelings. She never tried to approach it. The hallucination was as if she were seeing herself in a mirror, differing only in the absence of any signs of pregnancy, which were obvious in the patient at that time. The aesthetic qualities of the double gave her pleasure. "No, it wasn't all of a bundle, not stretched out or anything like that." "I thought I wasn't bad looking at all, I was quite pleased." The enthusiasm shown for this aspect of the phenomenon contrasted with the reticence displayed when other facets were discussed. The patient's explanation was that she was thinking of herself as someone else, objectifying herself. "I am standing myself out in front of me and looking at myself. I think of 'me' as 'she'." The phantom double became a less compelling symptom, gradually diminishing in extent to a vision of the upper half of the body and then of the face alone.

Concomitant with this regression a further complaint developed, in that to hear a voice would conjure up the speaker's face, whether the conversation was recalled from the past or just overheard from persons unseen.

These symptoms in turn lost prominence and were replaced by a complaint that when she looked at something there seemed for a brief moment to be a second object superimposed. For example, to look suddenly at a slipper would give the impression there were two. These were

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exactly the same, not deviated from one another or differing in size, but for a brief second two things existed. "I get a flash of the thing as well as the thing itself."

This also gradually abated and eventually disappeared as full term approached. Twilight sleep produced complete amnesia for the period of delivery. On wakening all these phenomena had returned. While in bed she turned suddenly and saw herself lying alongside. In spite of the amnesia for parturition she was content the child was hers, though she briefly had a premonition that it was going to die. Ideas of smashing the feeding bottle into the baby's face were prominent in hospital. Later, when she had returned home, these were replaced by fears centred on a hatchet "that might be used to kill people". She remarked "I love the baby but I can't appreciate her at the moment". The symptoms tended to recur at times of domestic readjustment, but disappeared over a period of three months, and she remains well 5 years later.

Whilst in hospital her behaviour was attention-seeking. Mixing freely, she was sociable and maintained a dramatic indifference except for a show of anxiety when describing the phantoms. A considerable period each day was spent on personal toilet, always being perfectly groomed and clothed in the height of fashion. Her attitude to these phenomena was that they belonged completely to her, a product of her own mind and not influenced in any way by anything outside. Attempts to modify them by strong suggestion were unavailing and the accounts never varied.

Exhaustive physical investigation showed no abnormality. In particular X-ray skull and repeated electroencephalographs were normal.

Comment

This was seen as an hysterical illness. Her premorbid personality showed evidence of suggestibility and shallow affectivity. On various occasions she had manipulated situations, and her husband commented on her sexual frigidity. Pregnancy was an undesired and unbearable reality. Attempts to dissociate were accompanied by projection of the phantom double in a form which denied any evidence of pregnancy.

There was nothing to suggest that physical factors played a part in this disturbance or that schizophrenic splitting was involved.

Features commonly found in autoscopy have been summarized by Lukianowicz (1958). Of the factors he records this patient shows many. The double's sudden appearance, with equally rapid disappearance after a few seconds, is typical. The immediate sense of ownership is frequently described. Commonly the apparition's facial expression reflects the patient's prevailing mood. Other features often mentioned are the image's clarity and its being positioned straight ahead. It differs from the majority in that the vision was of the whole body rather than just the head and neck. Again, it was seen in colour and seemed solid in contrast to the more usual grey and transparent spectre. To appear in day time is uncommon, dusk being more frequent. The most interesting deviation was that the spectre showed none of the changes of pregnancy which at that time were immediately obvious in the patient.

Discussion

Factors contributing to the causation of autoscopy have been explored in detail (Lukianowicz, 1958; Todd and Dewhurst, 1955). Both psychodynamic and organic features may be involved. A physical cause should always be seriously suspected, and autoscopy often has a basic pathology in epilepsy and migraine (Lippman, 1953; Lhermitte, 1951). This is not surprising since visual hallucinations are a feature of organic brain disease, but the physical precipitant may be a more generalized disturbance such as influenza. Extensive investigation showed no organic abnormality in this patient—a conclusion which is corroborated by her being well five years later.

Appreciation of some of the mental mechanisms commonly found in autoscopy, with or without an underlying organic cause, may help in understanding this case. Excessive narcissism has been considered a specific factor of paramount importance (Todd and Dewhurst, 1955). It is clearly present in this case. A good part of the patient's day was occupied in cosmetic preparations and though she wore an extensive range of clothing, it was always in the height of fashion. She was annoyed that her figure was distorted and unattractive, commented that she was "all of a bundle" and sought reassurance about an eventual return to shapeliness. The absence of any changes of pregnancy in the double highlights the psychodynamics and indicates the part played by wish fulfilment. She was quite conscious of her initial rejection of this pregnancy, and could not bring herself to arrange the child's layette even when forcefully directed to prepare for its coming. Later these attitudes mollified to a resigned acceptance, and

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eventually, having resumed responsibilities at home, she stated spontaneously that it had been worthwhile.

A further factor considered to be of importance is the use of visual imagery which varies from person to person. Some have little use for this faculty. Others are able to revive earlier visual experiences with hallucinatory clarity. Such supernormal powers of imagery have been found in many creative writers who had witnessed apparitions of themselves, for example Maupassant and Dostoevsky (Coleman, 1934). Interest was aroused when this patient claimed to be able to "see" sheets of type print recalled from her office days, but attempts to reproduce data from these pages were unsuccessful. Again, tests of visual retention produced low scores excluding eidetic imagery as the basis. Nevertheless, visual imagery seemed to play a large part in her thinking. She described how words of this internal debate were seen simultaneously with the thought and how appropriate faces appeared whenever she thought of or overheard a conversation. She also complained of seeing two objects superimposed. These things all suggest heightened use of visual imagery.

Various authors when discussing autoscopy have commented on phenomena such as hypnagogic hallucinations, phantom limbs and Capgras' Syndrome, which might be considered to be related (Coleman, 1934; Lukianowicz, 1958). The associated complaint of seeing a thing as having a second object superimposed recalls one aspect of Capgras' "illusion des sosies". In this syndrome the subject believes that he is being deceived by an exact double of a person well known to him. Some subjective disorder causes recognition to be distorted, resulting in the conviction that the other is an impostor. The person whose existence is denied is very important in the dynamics of the patient's illness (Arieti, 1959). This patient's description of seeing objects as being doubled cannot be attributed any specific significance, but it shows an underlying mechanism which has similarities to the process in Capgras' Syndrome.

It can be seen how excessive narcissism, wish fulfilment and a predominance of visual imagery have contributed to this patient's complaints. The psychodynamics of the situation would have required that there should be no pregnancy, and it was in this form that her double constantly appeared.

Summary

Autoscopy occurring during pregnancy is described. Reference is made to unusual features as well as to some which are commonly found in the double. The parts played by excessive narcissism, wish fulfilment and the use of visual imagery are commented upon. At no stage did the spectre show any signs of pregnancy.

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