

## THE OUTSKIRTS OF THOUGHT.

BY ELIA W. PEATTIE.

ALTHOUGH there is no philosophic mandate which man is fonder of quoting than "know thyself," yet no man of all the limitless procession has been able to obey it. He has not been permitted to comprehend the real source of his life, to understand his gestation, or to dig—however assiduous his excavations—to the origin of thought. His own personality remains a mystery to him, and nothing extraneous surprises him more than do certain of his own impulses. Nor is it alone his dim beginnings nor his ultimate destiny which he is forced to class as "unknown"; his very "now" is encased in mystery.

Though he may apprehend certain processes of the physical and intellectual departments of life there still remain links between them which intrigue and baffle him; and although he might at least be supposed to be at ease with himself, there are moments when, standing upon the rim of "the secret abyss of the unconscious self," he is not startled merely but appalled. He is aware at such moments that there lie within him potentialities of demonic force. If he escape great moral catastrophes as by a hair's breadth, by as close a hazard does he fail of sublimities. Playing habitually upon the middle octave of his key-board, he is made aware, nevertheless, by the overtones which thrill his listening ears, of an unused gamut of powers.

Man has, however, been keenly alive to the value of certain mental qualities. His ingenuity and his opposition were among the first to win his self-respect. That he could contrive to feed, clothe and house himself, and to defend himself from his enemies, stirred in him the pride that lifted his upper limbs from the ground and taught him to stand erect. When the powers of reflection, benevolence and economy came, later, he found himself pledged to the privileges and penalties of civilization. And though it is true

that in hours of great stress he drops these more recently acquired mental habits as if they were superfluous garments likely to hinder him in his struggle, yet with the return of safety and ease he resumes them with added assumptions of dignity.

Power—primordial power—is as much appreciated to-day as it ever was, but it has taken some new forms even while retaining many of those which are immemorial. The power of ideas lying behind aggressive action has been honored for centuries beyond record, but since the birth of that new science, psychology, the force of direct ideas has come to engage the attention of innumerable students of the mind. It is not alone in the universities and among scholars with academic confirmations of their ability that this inquisitiveness is felt. It forms an increasingly large part of the conversation among men and women who make no claim to specialization, and though some of the theories they advance may appear absurd enough, they are at least offered in good faith and without dogmatism. But there remains a vast mass of brain emission to which we pay no attention. Though the thread of our thoughts unwinds as long as life lasts, we have been accustomed to casting two-thirds or three-fourths of it from us as of no value. This enormous proportion—and the estimation of its relative quantity has not been made without much inquiry—consists of half-thoughts. So negligent have we been concerning these curious and fleeting wraiths of thought that it is not unlikely that many persons have not so much as observed their existence. That they differ in each human being is as certain as that the complete and impelling ideas of each individual differ. Yet as the completed thought or the definable emotion may be relied upon to possess a recognizable similarity in a given set of circumstances, antecedent and otherwise, so these half-thoughts may prove to be susceptible of classification.

By way of making these dark sayings more understandable, the mind may be compared to a kaleidoscope. A figure of compact and fascinating beauty holds us for a moment. Its completeness and its static charm win our approval; but the next second, the revolution of the toy shatters the figure, and we behold only scattering fragments. Conjoining each arrested figure, the constituents of which as to color, shape and contrast, we are able to apprise, are the broken and dissolving forms—the makings and the ruins of the completed thing.

Or, to take another illustration, let us suppose that we behold in a laboratory a colloidal mass of indefinable, liquified stuff without any visible differentiation of particles. Suddenly it crystalizes and

we see its singular beauty. It has form ; it has fixity, and we are able to give it a name and to estimate its value to us.

The experimenter who wishes to scrutinize his own half-thoughts will have excellent opportunity to do so in the drowsy period when sleep approaches, or during the moment of semi-stupor when he passes from the shadowy chambers of sleep into the clear room of waking. Sometimes these flying thoughts seem like the disembodied spirits of our own actions—little teasing, flitting regrets, fragmentary anticipations, swift yet ill-defined realizations of sorrow or joy ; but oftener they bear no relation to anything we consciously have thought or done. It is as if we heard the beatings of the wings of an invisible bird ; or as if our ideas were creatures of form and substance awaiting to appear before us, shuffling and pushing, and with only a minority finding place in our cognition. Sometimes they are so charming that in our effort to grasp them we awaken completely ; sometimes they are so menacing that the sane mind voluntarily repudiates them. It may be suggested that these things are but the fringe of dreams—the spume and spray of the waves of sleep-thought. But such a classification is not an explanation, and there are, moreover, reasons why it seems as if these half-thoughts ought not to be so classified. The chief of these is that frequently these half-thoughts bear no more relation to the things we dream than to the completed ideas which we think in our more controlled moments.

A large proportion of the little scudding visions which precede sleep or dismiss it, may be described as hauntings. Kipling gives a memorable description of the hauntings to be found in real sleep in his "Brushwood Boy," and Du Maurier has described them even better in *Peter Ibbetson*, but the hauntings of sleep, however telepathic or given to repetition, are not to be confused with the illusive half-thoughts which fly like bats about the margin of unconsciousness, and which are, like true and completed thought, considerably influenced by habit.

A lady who has found some diversion in observing the involuntary processes of her mind contributes the confession that she has had three "hauntings." They have not, she says, come to her every night, but they have recurred so frequently that they have made themselves a part of the warp and woof of that curious fabric of mental life which may best be described as "the familiar things." The first haunting came to her when she was a child, and was compacted of the vision of a little girl whose face she never saw, but who wore a blue dress and, when glimpsed, was invariably running

through a wood. Her short blue skirts could be followed by her sleep-seeking observer as she flitted among the trees, and as the little vision went deeper and deeper into the wood, sleep came nearer and nearer. At last the dream-child vanished, and sleep shut down completely upon the watcher. Later the little girl left the lady entirely and gave way to another "haunting"—a dark, rich, glowing masculine face, Arabian in its aspect. Beturbanned and bejeweled, implacable, with hot, valorous brown eyes, he gazed out of the darkness as the sign and token that sleep was nearing. This luxuriant visitor was uncongenial to his hostess, and she was relieved when he vanished to give place to a slender skater, clothed in black, who, like the first little visitor, never turned his face. The lady could see him winding down the dark ice of a river, watch him swing around the bend, note the fine vigorous rhythm of his form—made very small by distance and could follow him as he approached the shining path of a large star. If she could, so to speak, get him across that bright path, she slept; if he could not be coaxed to go so far, sleep held off from her, and she had to will him onward again and again before she could attain the kind oblivion she sought. Whether such hauntings are the particular characteristics of persons shadowed with insomnia or not, is something that cannot be theorized upon without much inquiry.

It may be that these hauntings should be classed with habits of the mind—those perplexing habits which tempt a person to fall into the same conversation over and over again with a certain person; and to drop from the lips involuntarily, upon the recurrence of a given occasion, the same phrase; or which trick the mind into dwelling upon certain foolish stories or tunes, when the same provocative incidents occur. Concerning these teasing mental bypaths, the psychologists have written a considerable amount, but they have not investigated the crepuscular little semi-sleep paths.

Now and then some whimsical and observant friend will offer a confession which will add to one's knowledge concerning this vague stuff, this trifling gray chiffon of the mind, but as a general thing folk are reluctant to speak of these subterranean mental processes, evidently regarding such caprices of the mind as abnormal, whereas they are in reality transitional. A very interesting contribution of personal experience came from a little boy of eleven who sometimes writes verses. He offered for criticism a curious rhymed composition which he called "Little Windows." It described eery casements opening on crooked little streets which ran through twilight land, and from these windows looked the faces of dwarfs and

elves, weeping or grinning, and the faces of foolish babies with bald heads, and old, old men, very wrinkled, with toothless gums. These hung from the windows for a second's space and were gone.

"Have you any idea what I mean?" asked the boy.

"Perhaps," was the reply, "you mean to describe the five minutes after you get in bed and before you fall asleep."

"That's it!" he said, honestly relieved that another fellow-creature should share his elf-land with him. "I couldn't find words for the things I really see, so I made up these little symbols. I didn't quite see the streets and windows, but I saw something that made me feel as if I had seen them."

He was told about the saying of Arthur Symons, who averred that the poets of the future would write about the things they discovered in themselves. Symons said that the external views appeared to have been taken. The epics were done with, the ballads written, nature described, and that all that now remained for the poets to do was to delve in themselves—in the misty mid-region of Me, he might have phrased it. Symons expressed it as his opinion that the reason Verlaine made so great an appeal to discriminating lovers of poetry was because he had the art of putting wordless things into words. Verlaine describes the Chimera as lending her back to the little lost children of his mind—the vagrant, runaway, dream-horde, the "little flies," of his "black suns" and "white nights," and he shouts "*Ite, acgri, somnia*" after them as he sees them departing. Again, however, he sees possibilities of goodness and beauty in these vanishing visions.

"Glimmering twilight things are these,  
Visions of the end of night.  
Truth, thou lightest them, I wis,  
Only with a distant light,

"Whitening through the hated shade  
In such grudging dim degrees,  
One must doubt if they be made  
By the moon among the trees,

"Or if these uncertain ghosts  
Shall take body bye and bye,  
And uniting with the hosts  
Tented by the azure sky,

"Framed by Nature's setting meet,  
Offer up in one accord  
From the heart's ecstatic heat  
Incense to the living Lord."

The note of worship struck in Verlaine's verse seems the fitting culmination of his poem, for the reason that religious perception appears not infrequently to come in some such mysterious way as he describes. A person may go for days with a sense of something bright gleaming down in the subconscious self, just as the eyes, busied about their necessary seeing, may be aware of the glitter of frozen snow without the window. Suddenly there comes a refulgence. Beauty bursts upon the eyes with something akin to violence. And in the same manner some spiritual joy shines, mystical and gleaming as the sun-lit snow-field, before the eyes of the spirit. It would be profoundly interesting to know to what extent the visions of the devout are the materialization of the wraiths of thought.

One of the most coherent things written upon the subject of half-thoughts came from the pen of Dr. Otto Weininger, who called them "henids." He writes: "A common example from what has happened to all of us may serve to illustrate what a henid is. I may have a definite wish to say something particular, and then something distracts me, and the 'it' I wanted to say or think has gone. Later on, by some process of association, the 'it' is quite suddenly reproduced, and I know at once that it was what was on my tongue, but, so to speak, in a more perfect state of development." Later, in trying to make clear his meaning, he says that henids are distinguished from thoughts by a lower grade of consciousness, by the absence of relief—the blending of the die and the impression, and he concludes, "one cannot describe henids; one can only be conscious of their existence."

He thinks that all of the thoughts of early infancy are henids, and suggests it may be that the perceptions of plants and animals partake of this character. He thinks that women are more indecisive than men, and concludes that women therefore are more subject to henids than are men. Other observers, less obsessed than Weininger with the idea of the ineptitude of consummate femininity, are of the opinion that men like women, are indecisive in certain directions. Each is so in dealing with unfamiliar work and situations. It may be inquired if the henid as it appears in the normally developed mind, is not the result of an instinct for recuperation. Reverie is a dim room into which one withdraws for rest, and a temperate indulgence in such a relaxation makes for the rebuilding of brain and nerve. When a man lights his pipe, or a woman takes up her crochet needle, the obvious occupation is really secondary to the pursuit of the gentle henid, who, however much

he may defy definition, has a little globule of peace hidden somewhere within him, even as the unresistant bivalve conceals his pearl.

No place is more propitious for the hunting of henids than a comfortable seat in a railway train. The flying scene arouses a horde of half-thoughts from their lair in the undiscovered self. A house, a gate, a path, seems to hold the very essence of familiarity. Birds picking at the wild rice, a windmill trembling half around its circuit and falling back, two spires announcing an unseen village beyond the hill, release from invisibility swarming schools of henids which gleam fish-like beneath a swift-flowing stream, and are gone before one can say whether they show the tawny-gold fin or the gray-blue luster, to tell if they be redsides or trout.

It will not do to say that the railway traveler merely has given the imagination play. Imagination involves ideas. These impressions do not attain the stature of ideas. They are a rout of sympathetic henids through which the traveler comes into fleeting touch with hundreds of previously unknown men, landscapes and habitations, at no cost to himself—beyond the railway fare. These lightning-swift adventures have the effect of elongating the journey, and yet, curiously enough, they help to pass the time. Hashish, it is said, has similar but much more emphasized effects. The long waves of thought that break upon the mind as it is submerged beneath an anesthesia, must bear some resemblance to the hashish visions. The tempo of the intoxicated man's thought, however, is much quicker. The figures in the mental mirage follow each other swiftly, breaking into shapes which pass from the fantastic to the appalling.

It will be remembered that Weininger spoke of the mental processes of animals and plants. It seems likely that the thoughts of the domestic animals are, for the most part, placid henids, arising in moments of excitation to the importance of thoughts. Many dogs and some horses appear to have clear ideas and indications of genuine character. A cat finds it more difficult to shake off the impersonal attitude of the jungle than do these other animals, but even pussy is not without her acumen and humor. Fleas, as is well known, can be trained to obey man; carrier pigeons have a superior form of knowledge; birds mock men with their perceptions of melody, and some of them speak the tongue of the masterful biped, though they dwell in intellectual twilight, see without observing much, hear without understanding, go hither and yon with but little purpose, and are constrained by only transitory affection. Yet the dog may die with his master, the eagle eat out his heart in chagrin, the lion pace his cage with true melancholy in his nostalgic

eyes, the cat follow his master hundreds of miles, the dove recognize an old-time friend in the streets of a thronged city. Here indeed, are far-reaching fields of conjecture but little explored.

John Burroughs does not accord reasoning powers to animals. Probably he would grant them no more intellectual force than is included in many henids and some lucid cognition. His chapters on *What Do Animals Know?* are worth perusal by those interested in the rudiments of thought.

The theory that plants have initiatory thoughts is not singular to Weininger. Darwin pointed out that the divisions between plant and animal life are imperceptible at certain points of conjunction, and he discerned as much perception in the sensitive plant as in the sponges. The biological theory of consciousness is that plants and animals, but not minerals, possess consciousness. Ernst Haeckel in *The Riddle of the Universe* has conceded consciousness to the very lowest forms of animal life and also to plants, and Max Verworn believes that the protists have developed self-consciousness, but that their sensations and movements are of an unconscious character—in other words, that their henids are of the vaguest sort. As for the poets, they have, regardless of the age or the country in which they lived, attributed aspiration and enjoyment to flowers and trees, and that teller of tales who gives individuality to animals—providing he does it well—is certain to win the applause of children old and young; for incontestibly the world seems to be a happier place when the little brothers of the air and field think, act and communicate according to laws in consonance with those that obtain among humans.

Henids have been spoken of as a means of recuperation, as an amusement, as a link between man and the lower forms of life, and may now be considered as the refuge of the tortured or too exalted mind. Suppose that a man is brought face to face suddenly with a great catastrophe. Does he devote himself to adequate reflections upon the disaster, weighing the suffering to be borne, and carefully estimating the changes it will bring to him? No; his mind shudders away from these gaunt realities and takes refuge in half-thoughts, observing immaterial things vagrantly, and permitting these fragmentary notions to drift away like motes in the sunshine. Or supposing that a supreme joy arrives. Does it bring with it the power to measure the felicity? Not at all; it in its turn is tempered to mortal use by these innumerable little semi-thoughts, these useful buffers between fact and perception. The victim who is led to the executioner's chair, the martyr who walks unprotestingly to his

death, alike are comforted by these shadowy ideas, and scenes and circumstances which else would overwhelm by their strangeness are made to approach familiarity by these curious little emanations from oneself.

In Mr. William James's *The Nature of Truth*, considerable is said about the thoughts that lie between thoughts—the conjunctive ideas, as he terms them. He speaks of these swift-moving half-thoughts as the short cuts or the by-paths which lead from one experience to another, and give to them an economical value. "In a general way," he writes, "the paths that run through conceptual experiences, that is, through 'thoughts,' or 'ideas,' that 'know' the things in which they terminate, are highly advantageous paths to follow. Not only do they yield inconceivably rapid transitions; but owing to the 'universal character' which they frequently possess, and to their capacity for association with one another in great systems, they outstrip the tardy consecutions of the things themselves, and sweep us toward our ultimate termini in a far more labor-saving way than the following of sensible perception ever could. Most thought-paths, it is true, are substitutes for nothing actual; they end outside the real world altogether, in wayward fancies, utopias, fictions, mistakes. But where they do re-enter reality and terminate therein, we substitute them always; and with these substitutes we pass the greater number of our hours."

This is a respectful tone to assume toward the thought-debris. But Mr. James has mined deep in the human soul; he has assayed the metal again and again, and he is too skilled a chemist not to estimate at the right value the dump of "tailings" which the less experienced operator casts aside.

Greater claims may be held for this thought-detritus, however, than that of labor-saving. Its value is far from being all negative. It is not too much to aver that it is a clew to our hidden and unrecognized selves. Much has been learned the last few years concerning the dual, and even the multiple personality. Many neurotic persons have developed two or more personalities often of the most oppositional qualities. In one state, a man afflicted with these warring individualities will be unconscious of all he experiences in the other state; and even the outward demonstrations of his personality will undergo a change, so that the tones of his voice, his gestures and smile, as well as his principles and tastes will suffer a sea-change. To determine which is the really normal, or the more desirable state, is no mean task, and beneficent and efficient

pathologists have succeeded in more than one instance in merging these seemingly antagonistic personalities, providing the restored neurotic with a character of excellent durability and worth. Fortunately, few are called upon to endure so confusing a partition of self, but in all of us there are undeveloped potentialities.

It is permissible for us to inquire the source of the swift impulses for sacrifice and heroism which leap into our consciousness now and then, startling us from our tepid goodness. We may well wish to know the meaning of the swift temptations which assail us and which are as unrelated to our usual customs and thoughts as a dodo to a thrush. How is it that we struggle all our lives between opposing influences—not necessarily classifiable as good or bad, but differing in tendency and destination. Why does the sight of a gypsy band tug at our domestic and suburban souls? Why does the sound of a blacksmith's hammer stir us as nothing within our well-ordered offices can do? Why have we unaccountable homesicknesses for the things we never have seen? Why does a picture of the yellow desert grip our imaginations? What are these cryptic sympathies which follow our obvious and explainable sympathies, as the gradations of the spectrum follow its primal colors? Are not these haunting, nameless wraiths of thought the shapeless guardians of the doors of understanding? We look through them into the houses of other souls and provide ourselves with synthetic experiences. The social pariah wrings from us the admission: "There but for God's grace go I," and, no less, the man or woman of great achievements and benevolences forces from us the confession: "There but for fears and doubts and haltings, go I."

May it not be admitted that we owe no inconsiderable portion of our most delicate happiness to our half-thoughts? Not to go further than the mere matter of recognitions and familiarities, we shall find infinite sources of satisfaction. The sense of home which rises to meet us at the creak of our own gate, the gleam of our own fire, the scent of our own roses, flooding us with vital at-homeness, with beautiful, inarticulate awareness, though compacted of nebulous and evasive thoughts, is nevertheless a superfine delight. And a perfume, a voice, a gesture, will call up memories which, piling higher and higher, finally obscure the sky of the present with tossing thought-cumuli.

The most illusive and transfigured of all the half-thoughts is, however, that which flutters into oblivion at the moment of awaking. It seems to be some essence of self, yet something dearer and more

desirable than self, and when it vanishes—as it invariably does when consciousness asserts itself—one seems to have parted company not only with an inner and secret core of being, but with the friends who companioned the hidden spirit. It is as if one turned from a door more truly one's own than any material door ever can be; or as if, in stepping out from that silent place upon the streets of life, one had quitted what was familiar and contenting for what was alién. The reality appears impoverished and the mind is suffused with a poignant wistfulness, for the half-glimpsed things lie beyond the barrier of sleep. It seems as if one had caught a hint of unknown glories of sight and sound, of peace and love, and of correspondence with the source of things which, in more self-directed and limited hours resolve themselves into a feeble and faint surmise.

No experience with half-thoughts can be universal, for no experience in action or in ideas completely repeats itself in this world of perpetual change and illimitable variety. Yet, because they are a part of the universal possession of thinking man, they will command the increasing attention of the psychologist beyond a doubt. The enormous proportion of time occupied by them in the mental life, makes such a result inevitable. More mysterious than thoughts, they make an appeal to all who are interested in the origins of our moralities, our inherent defects and our presciences. Uncontrolled as they are by the exercise of will, they fascinate by their freedom, their winged spontaneity; or—lest that figure of speech be thought too light—they may be compared to those unformed yet potential creatures which palpitated from the stones Deucalion hurled from his life-giving hand. They lift their strange faces but a little way above the earth, yet in each one lives the promise of life and achievement.

Massed and permitted to sink into a blue of subterranean brooding, these half-thoughts assume a curious and comforting quality like that of an incoherent lullaby, or the distant sound of the ocean, or the low breathing of the plains. But Arthur Symons has said it as no one may say it in prose. He rhymes it after this fashion:

“O, is it death or life  
That sounds like something strangely known  
In this subsiding out of strife,  
This slow sea-monotone?

“A sound, scarce heard through sleep,  
Murmurous as the August bees  
That fill the forest hollows deep  
About the roots of trees.

"O, is it life or death,  
O, is it hope or memory,  
That quiets all things with this breath  
Of the eternal sea?"