

## "Screen Memories"

Über Deckerinnerungen  
James Strachey

(a) German Editions:

1899 Mschr. Psychiat. Neurol., 6 (3), 215-30. (September.)

1925 G.S., 1, 465-88.

1952 G.W., 1, 531-54.

(b) English Translation:

'Screen Memories'

1950 C.P., 5, 47-69. (Tr. James Strachey.)

The present translation is a slightly revised reprint of that published in 1950.

An unpublished letter of Freud's to Fliess of May 25, 1899, tells him that on that date this paper was sent in to the editor of the periodical in which it appeared later in the year. He adds that he was immensely pleased by it during its production, which he takes as a bad omen for its future fate.

The concept of 'screen memories' was here introduced by Freud for the first time. It was no doubt brought into focus by his consideration of the particular instance which occupies the major part of the paper and which had been alluded to in a letter to Fliess of January 3, 1899 (Letter 101). Nevertheless the topic was closely related to several others which had been occupying his mind for many months previously—in fact ever since he had embarked on his self-analysis in the summer of 1897—problems concerning the operation of memory and its distortions, the importance and *raison d'être* of phantasies, the amnesia covering our early years, and, behind all this, infantile sexuality. Readers of the Fliess letters will find many approaches to the present discussion. See, for instance, the remarks on phantasies in Draft M of May 25, 1897 and in Letter 66 of July 7, 1897. The screen memories analysed by Freud at the end of

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Chapter IV of the 1907 edition of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901b) go back to this same summer of 1897.

It is a curious thing that the type of screen memory mainly considered in the present paper—one in which an early memory is used as a screen for a later event—almost disappears from later literature. What has since

come to be regarded as the regular type—one in which an early event is screened by a later memory—is only barely alluded to here, though it was already the one almost exclusively dealt with by Freud only two years later, in the chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* just mentioned. (See also footnote, p. 322.)

The intrinsic interest of this paper has been rather undeservedly overshadowed by an extraneous fact. It was not difficult to guess that the incident described in it was in fact an autobiographical one, and this became a certainty after the appearance of the Fliess correspondence. Many of the details, however, can be traced in Freud's published writings. Thus the children in the screen memory were in fact his nephew John and his niece Pauline, who appear at several points in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a). (Cf., for instance, Standard Ed., 5, 424-5, 483 and 486.) These were the children of his much older half-brother, who is mentioned in Chapter X of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901b), Standard Ed., 6, 227. This brother, after the break-up of the family at Freiberg when Freud was three, had settled in Manchester, where Freud visited him at the age of nineteen—not twenty, as is implied here (p. 314)—a visit alluded to in the same passage in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and also in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Standard Ed., 5, 519). His age at the time of his first return to Freiberg was also a year less than is represented here. He was sixteen, as he tells us in 'Letter to the Burgomaster of Píbor' (1931e), Standard Ed., 21, 259. We learn from this source too that the family with whom he stayed was named Fluss, and it was one of the daughters of this family, Gisela, who was the central figure of the present anecdote. The episode is fully described in the first volume of Ernest Jones's biography (1953, 27-9 and 35-7).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The name of Gisela Fluss makes an unexpected and quite unimportant appearance in Freud's notes on the 'Rat Man' analysis (1955a), Standard Ed., 10, 280.

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#### Section Citation

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In the course of my psycho-analytic treatment of cases of hysteria, obsessional neurosis, etc., I have often had to deal with fragmentary recollections which have remained in the patient's memory from the earliest years of his childhood. As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> great pathogenic importance must be attributed to the impressions of that time of life. But the subject of childhood memories is in any case bound to be of psychological interest, for they bring into striking relief a fundamental difference between the psychical functioning of children and of adults. No one calls in question the fact that the experiences of the earliest years of our childhood leave ineradicable traces in the depths of our minds. If, however, we seek in our memories to ascertain what were the impressions that were destined to influence us to the end of our lives, the outcome is either nothing at all or a relatively small number of isolated recollections which are often of dubious or enigmatic importance. It is only from the sixth or seventh year onwards—in many cases only after the tenth year—that our lives can be reproduced in memory as a connected chain of events. From that time on, however, there is also a direct relation between the psychical significance of an experience and its retention in the memory. Whatever seems important on account of its immediate or directly subsequent effects is recollected; whatever is judged to be inessential is forgotten. If I can remember an event for a long time after its occurrence, I regard the fact of having retained it in my memory as evidence of its having made a deep impression on me at the time. I feel surprised at forgetting something important; and I feel even more surprised, perhaps, at remembering something apparently indifferent.

It is only in certain pathological mental conditions that the relation holding in normal adults between the psychical significance of an event and its retention in memory once more ceases to apply. For instance, a hysteric habitually shows amnesia for some or all of the experiences which led to the onset

1 [Cf., for instance, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria' (1896a), p. 202 f. above.]

of his illness and which from that very fact have become important to him and, apart from that fact, may have been important on their own account. The analogy between pathological amnesia of this kind and the normal amnesia affecting our early years seems to me to give a valuable hint at the intimate connection that exists between the psychical content of neuroses and our infantile life.

We are so much accustomed to this lack of memory of the impressions of childhood that we are apt to overlook the problem underlying it and are inclined to explain it as a self-evident consequence of the rudimentary character of the mental activities of children. Actually, however, a normally developed child of three or four already exhibits an enormous amount of highly organized mental functioning in the comparisons and inferences which he makes and in the expression of his feelings; and there is no obvious reason why amnesia should overtake these psychical acts, which carry no less weight than those of a later age.

Before dealing with the psychological problems attaching to the earliest memories of childhood, it would of course be essential to make a collection of material by circularizing a fairly large number of normal adults and discovering what kind of recollections they are able to produce from these early years. A first step in this direction was taken in 1895 by V. and C. Henri, who sent round a paper of questions drawn up by them. The highly suggestive results of their questionnaire, which brought in replies from 123 persons, were published by the two authors in 1897. I have no intention at present of discussing the subject as a whole, and I shall therefore content myself with emphasizing the few points which will enable me to introduce the notion of what I have termed 'screen memories'.

The age to which the content of the earliest memories of childhood is usually referred back is the period between the ages of two and four. (This is the case with 88 persons in the series observed by the Henris.) There are some, however, whose memory reaches back further—even to the time before the completion of their first year; and, on the other hand, there are some whose earliest recollections go back only to their sixth, seventh, or even eighth year. There is nothing at the moment to show what else is related to these individual differences; but it

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is to be noticed, say the Henris, that a person whose earliest recollection goes back to a very tender age—to the first year of his life, perhaps—will also have a this disposal further detached memories from the following years, and that he will be able to reproduce his experiences as a continuous chain from an earlier point of time—from about his fifth year—than is possible for other people, whose first recollection dates from a later time. Thus not only the date of the appearance of the first recollection but the whole function of memory may, in the case of some people, be advanced or retarded.

Quite special interest attaches to the question of what is the usual content of these earliest memories of childhood. The psychology of adults would necessarily lead us to expect that those experiences would be selected as worth remembering which had aroused some powerful emotion or which, owing to their consequences, had been recognized as important soon after their occurrence. And some indeed of the observations collected by the Henris appear to fulfil this expectation. They report that the most frequent content of the first memories of childhood are on the one hand occasions of fear, shame, physical pain, etc., and on the other hand important events such as illnesses, deaths, fires, births of brothers and sisters, etc. We might therefore be inclined to assume that the principle governing the choice of memories is the same in the case of children as in that of adults. It is intelligible—though the fact deserves to be explicitly mentioned—that the memories retained from childhood should necessarily show evidence of the difference between what attracts the interest of a child and of an adult. This easily explains why, for instance, one woman reports that she remembers a number of accidents that occurred to her dolls when she was two years old but has no recollection of the serious and tragic events she might have observed at the same period. Now, however, we are met by a fact that is diametrically opposed to our expectations and cannot fail to astonish us. We hear that there are some people whose earliest recollections of childhood are concerned with everyday and indifferent events which could not produce any emotional effect even in children, but which are recollected (too clearly, one is inclined to say)<sup>1</sup> in

1 [Cf. footnote 1, p. 291 above. The point appears again below on pp. 312 and 313.]

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every detail, while approximately contemporary events, even if, on the evidence of their parents, they moved them intensely at the time, have not been retained in their memory. Thus the Henris mention a professor of philology whose earliest memory, dating back to between the ages of three and four, showed him a table laid for a meal and on it a basin of ice. At the same period there occurred the death of his grandmother which, according to his parents, was a severe blow to the child. But the professor of philology, as he now is, has no recollection of this bereavement; all that he remembers of those days is the basin of ice. Another man reports that his earliest memory is an episode upon a walk in which he broke off a branch from a tree. He thinks he can still identify the spot where this

happened. There were several other people present, and one of them helped him

The Henris describe such cases as rare. In my experience, based for the most part, it is true, on neurotics, they are quite frequent. One of the subjects of the Henris' investigation made an attempt at explaining the occurrence of these mnemonic images, whose innocence makes them so mysterious, and his explanation seems to me very much to the point. He thinks that in such cases the relevant scene may perhaps have been only incompletely retained in the memory, and that that may be why it seems so unenlightening: the parts that have been forgotten probably contained everything that made the experience noteworthy. I am able to confirm the truth of this view, though I should prefer to speak of these elements of the experience being omitted rather than forgotten. I have often succeeded, by means of psychoanalytic treatment, in uncovering the missing portions of a childhood experience and in thus proving that when the impression, of which no more than a torso was retained in the memory, had been restored to completeness, it did in fact agree with the presumption that it is the most important things that are recollected. This, however, provides no explanation of the remarkable choice which memory has made among the elements of the experience. We must first enquire why it should be that precisely what is important is suppressed and what is indifferent retained; and we shall not find an explanation of this until we have investigated the mechanism of these processes more deeply. We shall then form a notion that two psychical forces are concerned in bringing about memories of this sort.

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One of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other—a resistance—tries to prevent any such preference from being shown. These two opposing forces do not cancel each other out, nor does one of them (whether with or without loss to itself) overpower the other. Instead, a compromise is brought about, somewhat on the analogy of the resultant in a parallelogram of forces. And the compromise is this. What is recorded as a mnemonic image is not the relevant experience itself—in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one—and in this respect the first principle shows its strength, the principle which endeavours to fix important impressions by establishing reproducible mnemonic images. The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemonic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to

some degree associatively displaced from the former one. And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial. It will seem incomprehensible to us because we are inclined to look for the reason for its retention in its own content, whereas in fact that retention is due to the relation holding between its own content and a different one which has been suppressed. There is a common saying among us about shams, that they are not made of gold themselves but have lain beside something that is made of gold.<sup>1</sup> The same simile might well be applied to some of the experiences of childhood which have been retained in the memory.

There are numerous possible types of case in which one psychical content is substituted for another, and these come about in a variety of psychological constellations. One of the simplest of these cases is obviously that occurring in the childhood memories with which we are here concerned—the case, that is, where the essential elements of an experience are represented in memory by the inessential elements of the same experience. It is a case of displacement on to something associated by continuity; or, looking at the process as a whole, a case

1 [The simile reappears in Chapter VII of Freud's book on jokes (1905c),

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of repression accompanied by the substitution of something in the neighbourhood (whether in space or time). I have elsewhere<sup>1</sup> had occasion to describe a very similar instance of substitution which occurred in the analysis of a patient suffering from paranoia. The woman in question hallucinated voices, which used to repeat long passages from Otto Ludwig's novel *Die Heiterethei* to her. But the passages they chose were the most trifling and irrelevant in the book. The analysis showed, however, that there were other passages in the same work which had stirred up the most distressing thoughts in the patient. The distressing affect was a motive for putting up a defence against them, but the motives in favour of pursuing them further were not to be suppressed. The result was a compromise by which the innocent passages emerged in the patient's memory with pathological strength and clarity. The process which we here see at work—conflict, repression, substitution involving a compromise—returns in all psychoneurotic symptoms and gives us the key to understanding their formation. Thus it is not without importance if we are able to show the same process operating in the mental life of

normal individuals, and the fact that what it influences in normal people is precisely their choice of childhood memories seems to afford one more indication of the intimate relations which have already been insisted upon between the mental life of children and the psychical material of the neuroses.

The processes of normal and pathological defence and the displacements in which they result are clearly of great importance. But to the best of my knowledge no study whatever has hitherto been made of them by psychologists; and it remains to be ascertained in what strata of psychical activity and under what conditions they come into operation. The reason for this neglect may well be that our mental life, so far as it is the object of our conscious internal perception, shows nothing of these processes, apart from instances which we classify as 'faulty reasoning' and some mental operations which aim at producing a comic effect. The assertion that a psychical intensity<sup>2</sup> can be displaced from one presentation (which is then abandoned) on to another (which thenceforward plays the psychological part of the

1 'Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1896b). [See above, P. 181.]

2 [Cf. p.67 above.]

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former one) is as bewildering to us as certain features of Greek mythology—as, for instance, when the gods are said to clothe someone with beauty as though it were with a veil, whereas we think only of a face transfigured by a change of expression.

Further investigation of these indifferent childhood memories has taught me that they can originate in other ways as well and that an unsuspected wealth of meaning lies concealed behind their apparent innocence. But on this point I shall not content myself with a mere assertion but shall give a detailed report of one particular instance which seems to me the most instructive out of a considerable number of similar ones. Its value is certainly increased by the fact that it relates to someone who is not at all or only very slightly neurotic.

The subject of this observation is a man of university education, aged thirty-eight.<sup>1</sup> Though his own profession lies in a very different field, he has taken an interest in psychological questions ever since I was able to relieve him of a slight phobia by means of psycho-analysis. Last year he



drew my attention to his childhood memories, which had already played some part in his analysis. After studying the investigation made by V. and C. Henri, he gave me the following summarized account of his own experience.

‘I have at my disposal a fair number of early memories of childhood which I can date with great certainty. For at the age of three I left the small place where I was born and moved to a large town; and all these memories of mine relate to my birthplace and therefore date from my second and third years. They are mostly short scenes, but they are very well preserved and furnished with every detail of sense-perception, in complete contrast to my memories of adult years, which are entirely lacking in the visual element. From my third year onwards my recollections grow scantier and less clear; there are gaps in them which must cover more than a year; and it is not, I believe, until my sixth or seventh year that the stream of my memories becomes continuous. My memories up to the time of my leaving

1 [There can be no doubt that what follows is autobiographical material only thinly disguised. See Editor's Note, p. 302 above. At the date at which this paper was sent in for publication in May 1899, Freud was in fact just forty-three years old.]

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my first place of residence fall into three groups. The first group consists of scenes which my parents have repeatedly since described to me. As regards these, I feel uncertain whether I have had the mnemonic image from the beginning or whether I only construed it after hearing one of these descriptions. I may remark, however, that there are also events of which I have no mnemonic image in spite of their having been frequently retailed by my parents. I attach more importance to the second group. It comprises scenes which have not (so far as I know) been described to me and some of which, indeed, could not have been described to me, as I have not met the other participants in them (my nurse and playmates) since their occurrence. I shall come to the third group presently. As regards the content of these scenes and their consequent claim to being recollected, I should like to say that I am not entirely at sea. I cannot maintain, indeed, that what I have retained are memories of the most important events of the period, or what I should to-day judge to be the most important. I have no knowledge of the birth of a sister, who is two and a half years younger than I am; my departure, my first sight of the railway and the long carriage-drive before it—none of these has left a trace in my memory. On

the other hand, I can remember two small occurrences during the railway-journey; these, as you will recollect, came up in the analysis of my phobia. But what should have made most impression on me was an injury to my face which caused a considerable loss of blood and for which I had to have some stitches put in by a surgeon. I can still feel the scar resulting from this accident, but I know of no recollection which points to it, either directly or indirectly.<sup>1</sup> It is true that I may perhaps have been under two years old at the time.

‘It follows from this that I feel no surprise at the pictures and scenes of these first two groups. No doubt they are displaced memories from which the essential element has for the most part been omitted. But in a few of them it is at least hinted at, and in others it is easy for me to complete them by following certain pointers. By doing so I can establish a sound connection

1 [This accident is referred to twice in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), Standard Ed., 4, 17 and footnote, and 5, 560; also, indirectly, in a letter to Fliess of October 15, 1897 (Freud 1950a, Letter 71) and near the beginning of Lecture XIII of the *Introductory Lectures* (1916-17).]

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between the separate fragments of memories and arrive at a clear understanding of what the childish interest was that recommended these particular occurrences to my memory. This does not apply, however, to the content of the third group, which I have not so far discussed. There I am met by material—one rather long scene and several smaller pictures—with which I can make no headway at all. The scene appears to me fairly indifferent and I cannot understand why it should have become fixed in my memory. Let me describe it to you. I see a rectangular, rather steeply sloping piece of meadow-land, green and thickly grown; in the green there are a great number of yellow flowers—evidently common dandelions. At the top end of the meadow there is a cottage and in front of the cottage door two women are standing chatting busily, a peasant-woman with a handkerchief on her head and a children's nurse. Three children are playing in the grass. One of them is myself (between the age of two and three); the two others are my boy cousin, who is a year older than me, and his sister, who is almost exactly the same age as I am. We are picking the yellow flowers and each of us is holding a bunch of flowers we have already picked. The little girl has the best bunch; and, as though by mutual agreement, we—the two boys—fall on her and snatch

away her flowers. She runs up the meadow in tears and as a consolation the peasant-woman gives her a big piece of black bread. Hardly have we seen this than we throw the flowers away, hurry to the cottage and ask to be given some bread too. And we are in fact given some; the peasant-woman cuts the loaf with a long knife. In my memory the bread tastes quite delicious—and at that point the scene breaks off.

‘Now what is there in this occurrence to justify the expenditure of memory which it has occasioned me? I have racked my brains in vain over it. Does the emphasis lie on our disagreeable behaviour to the little girl? Did the yellow colour of the dandelions—a flower which I am, of course, far from admiring to-day—so greatly please me? Or, as a result of my careering round the grass, did the bread taste so much nicer than usual that it made an unforgettable impression on me? Nor can I find any connection between this scene and the interest which (as I was able to discover without any difficulty) bound together the other scenes from my childhood. Altogether, there seems to me

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something not quite right about this scene. The yellow of the flowers is a disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole, and the nice taste of the bread seems to me exaggerated in an almost hallucinatory fashion. I cannot help being reminded of some pictures that I once saw in a burlesque exhibition. Certain portions of these pictures, and of course the most inappropriate ones, instead of being painted, were built up in three dimensions—for instance, the ladies ‘bustles. Well, can you point out any way of finding an explanation or interpretation of this redundant memory of my childhood?’

I thought it advisable to ask him since when he had been occupied with this recollection: whether he was of opinion that it had recurred to his memory periodically since his childhood, or whether it had perhaps emerged at some later time on some occasion that could be recalled. This question was all that it was necessary for me to contribute to the solution of the problem; the rest was found by my collaborator himself, who was no novice at jobs of this kind.

‘I have not yet considered that point,’ he replied. ‘Now that you have raised the question, it seems to me almost a certainty that this childhood memory never occurred to me at all in my earlier years. But I can also recall the occasion which led to my recovering this and many other recollections of my earliest childhood. When I was seventeen and at my

secondary school, I returned for the first time to my birthplace for the holidays, to stay with a family who had been our friends ever since that remote date. I know quite well what a wealth of impressions overwhelmed me at that time. But I see now that I shall have to tell you a whole big piece of my history: it belongs here, and you have brought it upon yourself by your question. So listen. I was the child of people who were originally well-to-do and who, I fancy, lived comfortably enough in that little corner of the provinces. When I was about three, the branch of industry in which my father was concerned met with a catastrophe. He lost all his means and we were forced to leave the place and move to a large town. Long and difficult years followed, of which, as it seems to me, nothing was worth remembering. I never felt really comfortable in the town. I believe now that I was never free from a longing for the beautiful woods near our home, in which (as one of my memories from those days tells me) I used to

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run off from my father, almost before I had learnt to walk. Those holidays, when I was seventeen, were my first holidays in the country, and, as I have said, I stayed with a family with whom we were friends and who had risen greatly in the world since our move. I could compare the comfort reigning there with our own style of living at home in the town. But it is no use evading the subject any longer: I must admit that there was something else that excited me powerfully. I was seventeen, and in the family where I was staying there was a daughter of fifteen, with whom I immediately fell in love. It was my first calf-love and sufficiently intense, but I kept it completely secret. After a few days the girl went off to her school (from which she too was home for the holidays) and it was this separation after such a short acquaintance that brought my longings to a really high pitch. I passed many hours in solitary walks through the lovely woods that I had found once more and spent my time building castles in the air. These, strangely enough, were not concerned with the future but sought to improve the past. If only the smash had not occurred! If only I had stopped at home and grown up in the country and grown as strong as the young men in the house, the brothers of my love! And then if only I had followed my father's profession and if I had finally married her—for I should have known her intimately all those years! I had not the slightest doubt, of course, that in the circumstances created by my imagination I should have loved her just as passionately as I really seemed to then. A strange thing. For when I see her now from time to time—she happens to have married someone here—she is quite exceptionally indifferent to me. Yet I can remember

quite well for what a long time afterwards I was affected by the yellow colour of the dress she was wearing when we first met, whenever I saw the same colour anywhere else.’

That sounds very much like your parenthetical remark to the effect that you are no longer fond of the common dandelion. Do you not suspect that there may be a connection between the yellow of the girl's dress and the ultra-clear yellow of the flowers in your childhood scene?<sup>1</sup> [Cf. footnote 1, p.291.]

1 [This was Freud's regular method of reporting conversations—his interlocutor's remarks in inverted commas and his own without any. Cf., for instance, the dialogue in *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926e).]

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‘Possibly. But it was not the same yellow. The dress was more of a yellowish brown, more like the colour of wallflowers. However, I can at least let you have an intermediate idea which may serve your purpose. At a later date, while I was in the Alps, I saw how certain flowers which have light colouring in the lowlands take on darker shades at high altitudes. Unless I am greatly mistaken, there is frequently to be found in mountainous regions a flower which is very similar to the dandelion but which is dark yellow and would exactly agree in colour with the dress of the girl I was so fond of. But I have not finished yet. I now come to a second occasion which stirred up in me the impressions of my childhood and which dates from a time not far distant from the first. I was seventeen when I revisited my birthplace. Three years later during my holidays I visited my uncle and met once again the children who had been my first playmates, the same two cousins, the boy a year older than I am and the girl of the same age as myself, who appear in the childhood scene with the dandelions. This family had left my birthplace at the same time as we did and had become prosperous in a far-distant city.’

And did you once more fall in love—with your cousin this time—and indulge in a new set of phantasies?

‘No, this time things turned out differently. By then I was at the University and I was a slave to my books. I had nothing left over for my cousin. So far as I know I had no similar phantasies on that occasion. But I believe that my father and my uncle had concocted a plan by which I was to exchange the abstruse subject of my studies for one of more practical value, settle down, after my studies were completed, in the place where my uncle lived, and marry my cousin. No doubt when they saw

how absorbed I was in my own intentions the plan was dropped; but I fancy I must certainly have been aware of its existence. It was not until later, when I was a newly-fledged map of science and hard pressed by the exigencies of life and when I had to wait so long before finding a post here, that I must sometimes have reflected that my father had meant well in planning this marriage for me, to make good the loss in which the original catastrophe had involved my whole existence.’

Then I am inclined to believe that the childhood scene we are considering emerged at this time, when you were struggling

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for your daily bread—provided, that is, that you can confirm my idea that it was during this same period that you first made the acquaintance of the Alps.

‘Yes, that is so: mountaineering was the one enjoyment that I allowed myself at that time. But I still cannot grasp your point.’

I am coming to it at once. The element on which you put most stress in your childhood scene was the fact of the country-made bread tasting so delicious. It seems clear that this idea, which amounted almost to a hallucination, corresponded to your phantasy of the comfortable life you would have led if you had stayed at home and married this girl [in the yellow dress]—or, in symbolic language, of how sweet the bread would have tasted for which you had to struggle so hard in your later years. The yellow of the flowers, too, points to the same girl. But there are also elements in the childhood scene which can only be related to the second phantasy—of being married to your cousin. Throwing away the flowers in exchange for bread strikes me as not a bad disguise for the scheme your father had for you: you were to give up your unpractical ideals and take on a ‘bread-and-butter’ occupation, were you not?

‘It seems then that I amalgamated the two sets of phantasies of how my life could have been more comfortable—the “yellow” and the “country-made bread” from the one and the throwing-away of the flowers and the actual people concerned from the other.’

Yes. You projected the two phantasies on to one another and made a childhood memory of them. The element about the alpine flowers is as it were a stamp giving the date of manufacture. I can assure you that people often construct such things unconsciously—almost like works of fiction.

‘But if that is so, there was no childhood memory, but only a phantasy put back into childhood. A feeling tells me, though, that the scene is genuine. How does that fit in?’

There is in general no guarantee of the data produced by our memory. But I am ready to agree with you that the scene is genuine. If so, you selected it from innumerable others of a similar or another kind because, on account of its content (which in itself was indifferent) it was well adapted to represent the two phantasies, which were important enough to you. A

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recollection of this kind, whose value lies in the fact that it represents in the memory impressions and thoughts of a later date whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links, may appropriately be called a ‘screen memory’. In any case you will cease to feel any surprise that this scene should so often recur to your mind. It can no longer be regarded as an innocent one since, as we have discovered, it is calculated to illustrate the most momentous turning-points in your life, the influence of the two most powerful motive forces—hunger and love.<sup>1</sup> ‘Yes, it represented hunger well enough. But what about love?’

In the yellow of the flowers, I mean. But I cannot deny that in this childhood scene of yours love is represented far less prominently than I should have expected from my previous experience.

‘No. You are mistaken. The essence of it is its representation of love. Now I understand for the first time. Think for a moment! Taking flowers away from a girl means to deflower her. What a contrast between the boldness of this phantasy and my bashfulness on the first occasion and my indifference on the second.’

I can assure you that youthful bashfulness habitually has as its complement bold phantasies of that sort.

‘But in that case the phantasy that has transformed itself into these childhood memories would not be a conscious one that I can remember, but an unconscious one?’

Unconscious thoughts which are a prolongation of conscious ones. You think to yourself ‘If I had married so-and-so’, and behind the thought there is an impulse to form a picture of what the ‘being married’ really is. ‘I can go on with it now myself. The most seductive part of the whole subject for a young scapegrace is the picture of the marriage night. (What does he care about what comes afterwards?) But that picture cannot

venture out into the light of day: the dominating mood of diffidence and of respect towards the girl keeps it suppressed. So it remains unconscious—'

And slips away into a childhood memory. You are quite

1 [An allusion to a favourite line of Freud's from Schiller's 'Die Welt weisen'.]

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right. It is precisely the coarsely sensual element in the phantasy which explains why it does not develop into a conscious phantasy but must be content to find its way allusively and under a flowery disguise into a childhood scene.

'But why precisely, into a childhood scene, I should like to know?' For the sake of its innocence, perhaps. Can you imagine a greater contrast to these designs for gross sexual aggression than childish pranks? However, there are more general grounds that have a decisive influence in bringing about the slipping away of repressed thoughts and wishes into childhood memories: for you will find the same thing invariably happening in hysterical patients. It seems, moreover, as though the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive: *forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit*.<sup>1</sup>

'If that is so, I have lost all faith in the genuineness of the dandelion scene. This is how I look at it: On the two occasions in question, and with the support of very comprehensible realistic motives, the thought occurred to me: "If you had married this or that girl, your life would have become much pleasanter." The sensual current in my mind took hold of the thought which is contained in the protasis<sup>2</sup> and repeated it in images of a kind capable of giving that same sensual current satisfaction. This second version of the thought remained unconscious on account of its incompatibility with the dominant sexual disposition; but this very fact of its remaining unconscious enabled it to persist in my mind long after changes in the real situation had quite got rid of the conscious version. In accordance, as you say, with a general law, the clause that had remained unconscious sought to transform itself into a childhood scene which, on account of its innocence, would be able to become conscious. With this end in view it had to undergo a fresh transformation, or rather two fresh transformations. One of these removed the objectionable element from the protasis by expressing it figuratively; the second forced the apodosis into a shape capable of visual representation—using for the purpose



1 [‘Some day, perhaps, it will be a joy to remember even these things.’  
Virgil, Aeneid, I, 203.]

2 [A protasis is a conditional clause and an apodosis (see below) is a consequential one.]

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the intermediary ideas of “bread” and “bread-and-butter occupations”. I see that by producing a phantasy like this I was providing, as it were, a fulfilment of the two suppressed wishes—for deflowering a girl and for material comfort. But now that I have given such a complete account of the motives that led to my producing the dandelion phantasy, I cannot help concluding that what I am dealing with is something that never happened at all but has been unjustifiably smuggled in among my childhood memories.’

I see that I must take up the defence of its genuineness. You are going too far. You have accepted my assertion that every suppressed phantasy of this kind tends to slip away into a childhood scene. But suppose now that this cannot occur unless there is a memory-trace the content of which offers the phantasy a point of contact—comes, as it were, halfway to meet it. Once a point of contact of this kind has been found—in the present instance it was the deflowering, the taking away of the flowers—the remaining content of the phantasy is remodelled with the help of every legitimate intermediate idea—take the bread as an example—till it can find further points of contact with the content of the childhood scene. It is very possible that in the course of this process the childhood scene itself also undergoes changes; I regard it as certain that falsifications of memory may be brought about in this way too. In your case the childhood scene seems only to have had some of its lines engraved more deeply: think of the over-emphasis on the yellow and the exaggerated niceness of the bread. But the raw material was utilizable. If that had not been so, it would not have been possible for this particular memory, rather than any others, to make its way forward into consciousness. No such scene would have occurred to you as a childhood memory, or perhaps some other one would have—for you know how easily our ingenuity can build connecting bridges from any one point to any other. And apart from your own subjective feeling which I am not inclined to under-estimate, there is another thing that speaks in favour of the genuineness of your dandelion memory. It contains elements which have not been solved by what you have told me and which do not in fact fit in with the sense required by the

phantasy. For instance, your boy cousin helping you to rob the little girl of her flowers—can you make any sense of the

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idea of being helped in deflowering someone? or of the peasant-woman and the nurse in front of the cottage?

‘Not that I can see.’

So the phantasy does not coincide completely with the childhood scene. It is only based on it at certain points. That argues in favour of the childhood memory being genuine.

‘Do you think an interpretation like this of an apparently innocent childhood memory is often applicable?’

Very often, in my experience. Shall we amuse ourselves by seeing whether the two examples given by the Henris can be interpreted as screen memories concealing subsequent experiences and wishes? I mean the memory of a table laid for a meal with a basin of ice on it, which was supposed to have some connection with the death of the subject's grandmother, and the other memory, of a child breaking off a branch from a tree while he was on a walk and of his being helped to do it by someone.

He reflected for a little and then answered: ‘I can make nothing of the first one. It is most probably a case of displacement at work; but the intermediate steps are beyond guessing. As for the second case, I should be prepared to give an interpretation, if only the person concerned had not been a Frenchman.’

I cannot follow you there. What difference would that make?

‘A great deal of difference, since what provides the intermediate step between a screen memory and what it conceals is likely to be a verbal expression. In German “to pull one out” is a very common vulgar term for masturbation.<sup>1</sup> The scene would then be putting back into early childhood a seduction to masturbation—someone was helping him to do it—which in fact occurred at a later period. But even so, it does not fit, for in the childhood scene there were a number of other people present.’ Whereas his seduction to masturbate must have occurred in solitude and secrecy. It is just that contrast that inclines me to accept your view: it serves once again to make the scene innocent. Do you know what it means when in a dream we see ‘a lot of strangers’, as happens so often in dreams of nakedness in which we feel so terribly embarrassed? Nothing more nor less

1 [Cf. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), Standard Ed., 5, 348, footnote 2.]

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than secrecy, which there again is expressed by its opposite.<sup>1</sup> However, our interpretation remains a jest, since we have no idea whether a Frenchman would recognize an allusion to masturbation in the words *casser une branche d'un arbre* or in some suitably emended phrase. This analysis, which I have reproduced as accurately as possible, will, I hope, have to some extent clarified the concept of a 'screen memory' as one which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed. Different classes of screen memories can be distinguished according to the nature of that relation. We have found examples of two of these classes among what are described as the earliest memories of childhood—that is, if we include under the heading of screen memories the incomplete childhood scenes which are innocent by very reason of their incompleteness. It is to be anticipated that screen memories will also be formed from residues of memories relating to later life as well. Anyone who bears in mind their distinctive feature—namely that they are extremely well remembered but that their content is completely indifferent—will easily recall a number of examples of the sort from his own memory. Some of these screen memories dealing with events later in life owe their importance to a connection with experiences in early youth which have remained suppressed. The connection, that is, is the reverse of the one in the case which I have analysed, where a childhood memory was accounted for by later experiences. A screen memory may be described as 'retrogressive' or as having 'pushed forward' according as the one chronological relation or the other holds between the screen and the thing screened-off.<sup>2</sup> From another point of view, we can distinguish positive screen memories from negative ones (or refractory memories) whose content stands in a contrary relation to the suppressed material. The whole subject deserves a more thorough examination; but I must content myself with pointing out what complicated processes—processes, incidentally, which are altogether analogous to the formation

1 [Cf. Standard Ed., 4, 245-6.]

2 [I.e. according to whether the displacement has been in a backward or forward direction.]

of hysterical symptoms—are involved in the building up of our store of memories.

Our earliest childhood memories will always be a subject of special interest because the problem mentioned at the beginning of this paper (of how it comes about that the impressions which are of most significance for our whole future usually leave no mnemonic images behind) leads us to reflect upon the origin of conscious memories in general. We shall no doubt be inclined at first to separate off the screen memories which are the subject of this study as heterogeneous elements among the residues of childhood recollections. As regards the remaining images, we shall probably adopt the simple view that they arise simultaneously with an experience as an immediate consequence of the impression it makes and that thereafter they recur from time to time in accordance with the familiar laws of reproduction. Closer observation, however, reveals certain features which do not tally with this view. Above all, there is the following point. In the majority of significant and in other respects unimpeachable childhood scenes the subject sees himself in the recollection as a child, with the knowledge that this child is himself; he sees this child, however, as an observer from outside the scene would see him. The Henris duly draw attention to the fact that many of those taking part in their investigation expressly emphasized this peculiarity of childhood scenes. Now it is evident that such a picture cannot be an exact repetition of the impression that was originally received. For the subject was then in the middle of the situation and was attending not to himself but to the external world.

Whenever in a memory the subject himself appears in this way as an object among other objects this contrast between the acting and the recollecting ego may be taken as evidence that the original impression has been worked over. It looks as though a memory-trace from childhood had here been translated back into a plastic and visual form at a later date—the date of the memory's arousal. But no reproduction of the original impression has ever entered the subject's consciousness. There is another fact that affords even more convincing evidence in favour of this second view. Out of a number of childhood memories of significant experiences, all of them of similar distinctness and clarity, there will be some scenes which, when

they are tested (for instance by the recollections of adults), turn out to have been falsified. Not that they are complete inventions; they are false in the sense that they have shifted an event to a place where it did not occur—this is the case in one of the instances quoted by the Henris—or that they have merged two people into one or substituted one for the other, or the scenes as a whole give signs of being combinations of two separate experiences. Simple inaccuracy of recollection does not play any considerable part here, in view of the high degree of sensory intensity possessed by the images and the efficiency of the function of memory in the young; close investigation shows rather that these falsifications of memory are tendentious—that is, that they serve the purposes of the repression and replacement of objectionable or disagreeable impressions. It follows, therefore, that these falsified memories too, must have originated at a period of life when it has become possible for conflicts of this kind and impulses towards repression to have made a place for themselves in mental life—far later, therefore, than the period to which their content belongs. But in these cases too the falsified memory is the first that we become aware of: the raw material of memory-traces out of which it was forged remains unknown to us in its original form. The recognition of this fact must diminish the distinction we have drawn between screen memories and other memories derived from our childhood. It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, emerge; they were formed at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.<sup>1</sup>

1 [The type of screen memory considered here is related to the ‘retrospective phantasies’ often discussed by Freud later; e.g. in the ‘Rat Man’ analysis (1909d), Standard Ed., 10, 206-8 n., in Sections V and VII of the ‘Wolf Man’ analysis (1918b) and in Lectures XXI and XXIII of the Introductory Lectures (1916-17).]