SOME REFLECTIONS ON SCHOOLBOY PSYCHOLOGY – (1914)

It gives you a queer feeling if, late in life, you are ordered once again to write a school essay. But you obey automatically, like the old soldier who, at the word ‘Attention!’, cannot help dropping whatever he may have in his hands and who finds his little fingers pressed along the seams of his trousers. It is strange how readily you obey the orders, as though nothing in particular had happened in the last half-century. But in fact you have grown old in the interval, you are on the eve of your sixtieth birthday, and your physical feelings, as well as your mirror, show unmistakably how far your life’s candle is burnt down.

As little as ten years ago, perhaps, you may have had moments at which you suddenly felt quite young again. As you walked through the streets of Vienna - already a grey-beard, and weighed down by all the cares of family life - you might come unexpectedly on some well-preserved, elderly gentleman and would greet him humbly almost, because you had recognized him as one of your former schoolmasters. But afterwards you would stop and reflect: ‘Was that really he? or only some one deceptively like him? How youthful he looks! And how old you yourself have grown! How old can he be to-day? Can it be possible that the men who used to stand for us as types of adulthood were really so little older than we were?’

At such moments as these, I used to find, the present time seemed to sink into obscurity and the years between ten and eighteen would rise from the corners of my memory, with all their guesses and illusions, their painful distortions and heartening successes - my first glimpses of an extinct civilization (which in my case was to bring me as much consolation as anything else in the struggles of life), my first contacts with the sciences, among which it seemed open to me to choose to which of them I should dedicate what were no doubt my inestimable services. And I seem to remember that through the whole of this time there ran a premonition of a task ahead, till it found open expression in my school-leaving essay as a wish that I might during the course of my life contribute something to our human knowledge.

Later I became a physician - or a psychologist, rather - and was able to create a new psychological discipline, something that is known as ‘psycho-analysis’, which is followed to-day with excited interest, and is greeted with praise and blame, by physicians and enquirers in neighbouring, and in distant, foreign lands - but least of all, of course, in our own country.

As a psycho-analyst I am bound to be concerned more with emotional than intellectual processes, with unconscious than with conscious mental life. My emotion at meeting my old schoolmaster warns me to make a first admission: it is hard to decide whether what affected us more and was of greater importance to us was our concern with the sciences that we were taught or with the personalities of our teachers. It is true, at least, that this second concern was a perpetual undercurrent in all of us, and that in many of us the path to the sciences led only through our teachers. Some of us stopped half-way along that path, and for a few - why not admit as much? - it was on that account blocked for good and all.

We courted them or turned our backs on them, we imagined sympathies and antipathies in them which probably had no existence, we studied their characters and on theirs we formed or misformed our own. They called up our fiercest opposition and forced us to complete submission; we peered into their little weaknesses, and took pride in their excellences, their knowledge and their justice. At bottom we felt a great affection for them if they gave us any ground for it, though I cannot tell how many of them were aware of this. But it cannot be denied that our position in regard to them was a quite remarkable one and one which may well have had its inconvenience for those concerned. We were from the very first equally inclined to love and to hate them, to criticize and respect them. Psycho-analysis has given the name of 'ambivalence' to this readiness to contradictory attitudes, and it has no difficulty in pointing to the source of ambivalent feelings of such a kind.

For psycho-analysis has taught us that the individual's emotional attitudes to other people, which are of such extreme importance to his later behaviour, are already established at an unexpectedly early age. The nature and quality of the human child's relations to people of his own and the opposite sex have already been laid down in the first six years of his life. He may afterwards develop and transform them in certain directions but he can no longer get rid of them. The people to whom he is in this way fixed are his parents and his brothers and sisters. All those whom he gets to know later become substitute figures for these first objects of his feelings. (We should perhaps add to his parents any other people, such as nurses, who cared for him in his infancy.) These substitute figures can be classified from his point of view according as they are derived from what we call the 'imagos' of his father, his mother, his brothers and sisters, and so on. His later acquaintances are thus obliged to take over a kind of emotional heritage; they encounter sympathies and antipathies to the production of which they themselves have contributed little. All of his later choices of friendship and love follow upon the basis of the memory-traces left behind by these first prototypes.

Of all the imagos of a childhood which, as a rule, is no longer remembered, none is more important for a youth or a man than that of his father. Organic necessity introduces into a man's relation to his father an emotional ambivalence which we have found most strikingly expressed in the Greek myth of King Oedipus. A little boy is bound to love and admire his father, who seems to him the most powerful, the kindest and the wisest creature in the world. God himself is after all only an exaltation of this picture of a father as he is represented in the mind of early childhood. But soon the other side of this emotional relationship emerges. One's father is recognized as the paramount disturber of one's instinctual life; he becomes a model not only to imitate but also to get rid of, in order to take his place. Thenceforward affectionate and hostile impulses towards him persist side by side, often to the end of one's life, without either of them being able to do away with the other. It is in this existence of contrary feelings side by side that lies the essential character of what we call emotional ambivalence.

In the second half of childhood a change sets in in the boy's relation to his father - a change whose importance cannot be exaggerated. From his nursery the boy

begins to cast his eyes upon the world outside. And he cannot fail now to make discoveries which undermine his original high opinion of his father and which expedite his detachment from his first ideal. He finds that his father is no longer the mightiest, wisest and richest of beings; he grows dissatisfied with him, he learns to criticize him and to estimate his place in society; and then, as a rule, he makes him pay heavily for the disappointment that has been caused by him. Everything that is hopeful, as well as everything that is unwelcome, in the new generation is determined by this detachment from the father.

It is in this phase of a youth's development that he comes into contact with his teachers. So that we can now understand our relation to our schoolmasters. These men, not all of whom were in fact fathers themselves, became our substitute fathers. That was why, even though they were still quite young, they struck us as so mature and so unattainably adult. We transferred on to them the respect and expectations attaching to the omniscient father of our childhood, and we then began to treat them as we treated our fathers at home. We confronted them with the ambivalence that we had acquired in our own families and with its help we struggled with them as we had been in the habit of struggling with our fathers in the flesh. Unless we take into account our nurseries and our family homes, our behaviour to our schoolmasters would be not only incomprehensible but inexcusable.

As schoolboys we had other and scarcely less important experiences with the successors of our brothers and sisters - our schoolfellows - but these must be described elsewhere. In a commemoration of the jubilee of our school it is on the masters that our thoughts must rest.