

## **A CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTION FROM DICHTUNG UND WAHRHEIT - (1917)**

'If we try to recollect what happened to us in the earliest years of childhood, we often find that we confuse what we have heard from others with what is really a possession of our own derived from what we ourselves have witnessed.' This remark is found on one of the first pages of Goethe's account of his life, which he began to write at the age of sixty. It is preceded only by some information about his birth, which 'took place on August 28, 1749, at midday on the stroke of twelve'. The stars were in a favourable conjunction and may well have been the cause of his survival, for at his entry into the world he was 'as though dead', and it was only after great efforts that he was brought to life. There follows on this a short description of the house and of the place in it where the children - he and his younger sister - best liked to play. After this, however, Goethe relates in fact only one single event which can be assigned to the 'earliest years of childhood' (the years up to four?) and of which he seems to have preserved a recollection of his own.

The account of it runs as follows: 'And three brothers (von Ochsenstein by name) who lived over the way became very fond of me; they were orphan sons of the late magistrate, and they took an interest in me and used to tease me in all sorts of ways.

'My people used to like to tell of all kinds of pranks in which these men, otherwise of a serious and retiring disposition, used to encourage me. I will quote only one of these exploits. The crockery-fair was just over, and not only had the kitchen been fitted up from it with what would be needed for some time to come, but miniature utensils of the same sort had been bought for us children to play with. One fine afternoon, when all was quiet in the house, I was playing with my dishes and pots in the hall' (a place which had already been described, opening on to the street) 'and, since this seemed to lead to nothing, I threw a plate into the street, and was overjoyed to see it go to bits so merrily. The von Ochsensteins, who saw how delighted I was and how joyfully I clapped my little hands, called out "Do it again!" I did not hesitate to sling out a pot on to the paving-stones, and then, as they kept crying "Another!", one after another all my little dishes, cooking-pots and pans. My neighbours continued to show their approval and I was highly delighted to be amusing them. But my stock was all used up, and still they cried "Another!" So I ran off straight into the kitchen and fetched the earthenware plates, which made an even finer show as they smashed to bits. And thus I ran backwards and forwards, bringing one plate after another, as I could reach them in turn from the dresser; and, as they were not content with that, I hurled every piece of crockery I could set hold of to the same destruction. Only later did someone come and interfere and put a stop to it all. The damage was done, and to make up for so much broken earthenware there was at least an amusing story, which the rascals who had been its instigators enjoyed to the end of their lives.'

In pre-analytic days it was possible to read this without finding occasion to pause and without feeling surprised, but later on the analytic conscience became active.

We had formed definite opinions and expectations about the memories of earliest childhood, and would have liked to claim universal validity for them. It should not be a matter of indifference or entirely without meaning which detail of a child's life had escaped the general oblivion. It might on the contrary be conjectured that what had remained in memory was the most significant element in that whole period of life, whether it had possessed such an importance at the time, or whether it had gained subsequent importance from the influence of later events.

The high value of such childish recollections was, it is true, obvious only in a few cases. Generally they seemed indifferent, worthless even, and it remained at first incomprehensible why just these memories should have resisted amnesia; nor could the person who had preserved them for long years as part of his own store of memories see more in them than any stranger to whom he might relate them. Before their significance could be appreciated, a certain work of interpretation was necessary. This interpretation either showed that their content required to be replaced by some other content, or revealed that they were related to some other unmistakably important experiences and had appeared in their place as what are known as 'screen memories'.

In every psycho-analytic investigation of a life-history it is always possible to explain the meaning of the earliest childhood memories along these lines. Indeed, it usually happens that the very recollection to which the patient gives precedence, which he relates first, with which he introduces the story of his life, proves to be the most important, the very one that holds the key to the secret pages of his mind. But the little childish episode related in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* does not rise to our expectations. The ways and means that with our patients lead to interpretation are of course not available to us here; the episode does not seem in itself to admit of any traceable connection with important impressions at a later date. A mischievous trick with damaging effects on the household economy, carried out under the spur of outside encouragement, is certainly no fitting headpiece for all that Goethe has to tell us of his richly filled life. An impression of utter innocence and irrelevance clings to this childish memory, and it might be taken as a warning not to stretch the claims of psycho-analysis too far nor to apply it in unsuitable places.

The little problem, therefore, had long since slipped out of my mind, when one day chance brought me a patient in whom a similar childhood memory appeared in a clearer connection. He was a man of twenty-seven, highly educated and gifted, whose life at that time was entirely filled with a conflict with his mother that affected all his interests, and from the effects of which his capacity for love and his ability to lead an independent existence had suffered greatly. This conflict went far back into his childhood; certainly to his fourth year. Before that he had been a very weakly child, always ailing, and yet that sickly period was glorified into a paradise in his memory; for then he had had exclusive, uninterrupted possession of his mother's affection. When he was not yet four, a brother, who is still living, was born, and in his reaction to that disturbing event he became transformed into an obstinate, unmanageable boy, who perpetually provoked his mother's severity. More over, he never regained the right path.

When he came to me for treatment - by no means the least reason for his coming was that his mother, a religious bigot, had a horror of psycho-analysis - his jealousy of the younger brother (which had once actually been manifested as a murderous attack on the infant in its cradle) had long been forgotten. He now treated his brother with great consideration; but certain curious fortuitous actions of his (which involved sudden and severe injuries to favourite animals, like his sporting dog or birds which he had carefully reared,) were probably to be understood as echoes of these hostile impulses against the little brother.

Now this patient related that, at about the time of the attack on the baby he so much hated, he had thrown all the crockery he could lay hands on out of the window of their country house into the road-the very same thing that Goethe relates of his childhood in *Dichtung und Wahrheit!* I may remark that my patient was of foreign nationality and was not acquainted with German literature; he had never read Goethe's autobiography.

This communication naturally suggested to me that an attempt might be made to explain Goethe's childish memory on the lines forced upon us by my patient's story. But could the necessary conditions for this explanation be shown to exist in the poet's childhood? Goethe himself, it is true, makes the instigation of the von Ochsenstein brothers responsible for his childish prank. But from his own narrative it can be seen that these grown-up neighbours merely encouraged him to go on with what he was doing. The beginning was on his own initiative, and the reason he gives for this beginning - 'since this (the game) seemed to lead to nothing' - is surely, without any forcing of its meaning, a confession that at the time of writing it down and probably for many years previously he was not aware of any adequate motive for his behaviour.

It is well known that Johann Wolfgang and his sister Cornelia were the eldest survivors of a considerable family of very weakly children. Dr. Hanns Sachs has been so kind as to supply me with the following details concerning these brothers and sisters of Goethe's, who died in childhood:

(a) Hermann Jakob, baptized Monday, November 27, 1752; reached the age of six years and six weeks; buried January 13, 1759.

(b) Katharina Elisabetha, baptized Monday, September 9, 1754; buried Thursday, December 22, 1755. (One year and four months old).

(c) Johanna Maria, baptized Tuesday, March 29, 1757, and buried Saturday, August 11, 1759. (Two years and four months old)- (This was doubtless the very pretty and attractive little girl celebrated by her brother.)

(d) Georg Adolph, baptized Sunday, June 15, 1760; buried, eight months old, Wednesday, February 18, 1761.<sup>1</sup>

Goethe's next youngest sister, Cornelia Friederica Christiana, was born on December 7, 1750, when he was fifteen months old. This slight difference in age almost excludes the possibility of her having been an object of jealousy. It is known

that, when their passions awake, children never develop such violent reactions against the brothers and sisters they find already in existence, but direct their hostility against the newcomers. Nor is the scene we are endeavouring to interpret reconcilable with Goethe's tender age at the time of, or shortly after, Cornelia's birth.

At the time of the birth of the first little brother, Hermann Jakob, Johann Wolfgang was three and a quarter years old. Nearly two years later, when he was about five years old, the second sister was born. Both ages come under consideration in dating the episode of the throwing out of the crockery. The earlier is perhaps to be preferred; and it would best agree with the case of my patient, who was about three and a quarter years old at the birth of his brother.

Moreover, Goethe's brother Hermann Jakob, to whom we are thus led in our attempt at interpretation, did not make so brief a stay in the family nursery as the children born afterwards. One might feel some surprise that the autobiography does not contain a word of remembrance of him.<sup>1</sup> He was over six, and Johann Wolfgang was nearly ten, when he died. Dr. Hirschmann, who was kind enough to place his notes on this subject at my disposal, says:

'Goethe, too, as a little boy saw a younger brother die without regret. At least, according to Bettina Brentano his mother gave the following account: "It struck her as very extraordinary that he shed no tears at the death of his younger brother Jakob who was his playfellow; he seemed on the contrary to feel annoyance at the grief of his parents and sisters. When, later on, his mother asked the young rebel if he had not been fond of his brother, he ran into his room and brought out from under the bed a heap of papers on which lessons and little stories were written, saying that he had done all this to teach his brother." So it seems all the same that the elder brother enjoyed playing father to the younger and showing him his superiority.'

<sup>1</sup> (Footnote added 1924:) I take this opportunity of withdrawing an incorrect statement which should not have been made. In a later passage in this first volume the younger brother is mentioned and described. It occurs in connection with memories of the serious illnesses of childhood, from which this brother also suffered 'not a little'. 'He was a delicate child, quiet and self-willed, and we never had much to do with each other. Besides, he hardly survived the years of infancy.'

The opinion might thus be formed that the throwing of crockery out of the window was a symbolic action, or, to put it more correctly, a magic action, by which the child (Goethe as well as my patient) gave violent expression to his wish to get rid of a disturbing intruder. There is no need to dispute a child's enjoyment of smashing things; if an action is pleasurable in itself, that is not a hindrance but rather an inducement to repeat it in obedience to other purposes as well. It is unlikely, however, that it could have been the pleasure in the crash and the breaking which ensured the childish prank a lasting place in adult memory. Nor is there any objection to complicating the motivation of the action by adding a further factor. A child who breaks crockery knows quite well that he is doing something naughty for

which grown-ups will scold him, and if he is not restrained by that knowledge, he probably has a grudge against his parents that he wants to satisfy; he wants to show naughtiness.

The pleasure in breaking and in broken things would be satisfied, too, if the child simply threw the breakable object on the ground. The hurling them out of the window into the street would still remain unexplained. This 'out!' seems to be an essential part of the magic action and to arise directly from its hidden meaning. The new baby must be got rid of - through the window, perhaps because he came in through the window. The whole action would thus be equivalent to the verbal response, already familiar to us, of a child who was told that the stork had brought a little brother. 'The stork can take him away again!' was his verdict.

All the same, we are not blind to the objections - apart from any internal uncertainties - against basing the interpretation of a childhood act on a single parallel. For this reason I had for years kept back my theory about the little scene in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Then one day I had a patient who began his analysis with the following remarks, which I set down word for word: 'I am the eldest of a family of eight or nine children.<sup>1</sup> One of my earliest recollections is of my father sitting on the bed in his night-shirt, and telling me laughingly that I had a new brother. I was then three and three-quarters years old; that is the difference in age between me and my next younger brother. I know, too, that a short time after (or was it a year before?)<sup>2</sup> I threw a lot of things, brushes - or was it only one brush? - shoes and other things, out of the window into the street. I have a still earlier recollection. When I was two years old, I spent a night with my parents in a hotel bedroom at Linz on the way to the Salzkammergut. I was so restless in the night and made such a noise that my father had to beat me.'

After hearing this statement I threw all doubts to the winds. When in analysis two things are brought out one immediately after the other, as though in one breath, we have to interpret this proximity as a connection of thought. It was, therefore, as if the patient had said, 'Because I found that I had got a new brother, I shortly afterwards threw these things into the street.' The act of flinging the brushes, shoes and so on, out of the window must be recognized as a reaction to the birth of the brother. Nor is it a matter for regret that in this instance the objects thrown out were not crockery but other things, probably, anything the child could reach at the moment. - The hurling out (through the window into the street) thus proves to be the essential thing in the act, while the pleasure in the smashing and the noise, and the class of object on which 'execution is done', are variable and unessential points.

Naturally, the principle of there being a connection of thought must be applied as well to the patient's third childish recollection, which is the earliest, though it was put at the end of the short series. This can easily be done. Evidently the two-year-old child was so restless because he could not bear his parents being in bed together. On the journey it was no doubt impossible to avoid the child being a witness of this. The feelings which were aroused at that time in the jealous little boy

left him with an embitterment against women which persisted and permanently interfered with the development of his capacity for love.

<sup>1</sup> A momentary error of a striking character. It was probably induced by the influence of the intention, which was already showing itself, to get rid of a brother. (Cf. Ferenczi, 1912, 'On Transitory Symptoms during Analysis'.)

<sup>2</sup> This doubt, attaching to the essential point of the communication for purposes of resistance, was shortly afterwards withdrawn by the patient of his own accord.<sup>4</sup> After making these two observations I expressed the opinion at a meeting of the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society that occurrences of the same kind might be not infrequent among young children; in response, Frau Dr. von Hug-Hellmuth placed two further observations at my disposal, which I append here.

I

'At the age of about three and a half, little Erich quite suddenly acquired the habit of throwing everything he did not like out of the window. He also did it, however, with things that were not in his way and did not concern him. On his father's birthday - he was three years and four and a half months old - he snatched a heavy rolling-pin from the kitchen, dragged it into the living-room and threw it out of the window of the third-floor flat into the street. Some days later he sent after it the kitchen-pestle, and then a pair of heavy mountaineering boots of his father's, which he had first to take out of the cupboard.<sup>1</sup>

'At that time his mother had a miscarriage, in the seventh or eighth month of pregnancy, and after that the child was "sweet and quiet and so good that he seemed quite changed". In the fifth or sixth month he repeatedly said to his mother, "Mummy, I'll jump on your tummy" - or, "I'll push your tummy in." And shortly before the miscarriage, in October, he said, "If I must have a brother, at least I don't want him till after Christmas."

II

'A young lady of nineteen told me spontaneously that her earliest recollection was as follows: "I see myself, frightfully naughty, sitting under the table in the dining-room, ready to creep out. My cup of coffee is standing on the table - I can still see the pattern on the china quite plainly - and Granny comes into the room just as I am going to throw it out of the window.

"For the fact was that no one had been bothering about me, and in the meantime a skin had formed on the coffee, which was always perfectly dreadful to me and still is.

"On that day my brother, who is two and a half years younger than I am, was born, and so no one had had any time to spare for me.

"They always tell me that I was insupportable on that day: at dinner I threw my father's favourite glass on the floor, I dirtied my frock several times, and was in the worst temper from morning to night. In my rage I tore a bath-doll to pieces."

<sup>1</sup> 'He always chose heavy objects.' <sup>5</sup> These two cases scarcely call for a commentary. They establish without further analytic effort that the bitterness children feel about the expected or actual appearance of a rival finds expression in throwing objects out of the window and in other acts of naughtiness and destructiveness. In the first case the 'heavy objects' probably symbolized the mother herself, against whom the child's anger was directed so long as the new baby had not yet appeared. The three-and-a-half-year-old boy knew about his mother's pregnancy and had no doubt that she had got the baby in her body. 'Little Hans'<sup>1</sup> and his special dread of heavily loaded carts may be recalled here.<sup>2</sup> In the second case the very youthful age of the child, two and a half years, is noteworthy.

If we now return to Goethe's childhood memory and put in the place it occupies in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* what we believe we have obtained through observations of other children, a perfectly valid train of thought emerges which we should not otherwise have discovered. It would run thus: 'I was a child of fortune: destiny preserved my life, although I came into the world as though dead. Even more, destiny removed my brother, so that I did not have to share my mother's love with him.' The train of thought then goes on to someone else who died in those early days - the grandmother who lived like a quiet friendly spirit in another part of the house.

I have, however, already remarked elsewhere that if a man has been his mother's undisputed darling he retains throughout life the triumphant feeling, the confidence in success, which not seldom brings actual success along with it. And Goethe might well have given some such heading to his autobiography as: 'My strength has its roots in my relation to my mother.'

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy', (1909b)

<sup>2</sup> Further confirmation of this pregnancy-symbolism was given me some time ago by a lady of over fifty. She had often been told that as a little child, when she could hardly talk, she used to drag her father to the window in great agitation whenever a heavy furniture-van was passing along the street. In view of other recollections of the houses they had lived in, it became possible to establish that she was then younger than two and three quarter years. At about that time the brother next to her was born, and in consequence of this addition to the family a move was made. At about the same time, she often had an alarming feeling before going to sleep of something uncannily large, that came up to her, and 'her hands got so thick'.