



The Game of Psychoanalysis

BY GILBERT K. CHESTERTON



OF psychoanalysis it may be said literally, at least in one sense, that it is such stuff as dreams are made of. Some of us may be tempted to expand the sense of stuff to the significance of stuff and nonsense. But it is more moderate, and more exact, to say that this new scientific notion, like many such notions, divides itself into a smaller element, which may in a more serious sense be called stuff, and a much larger element which might more correctly be called stuffing. Psychoanalysis can no longer be dismissed as a fad; it has risen to the dignity of a fashion, and possesses all that moral authority and intellectual finality which we associate with a particular pattern of hats or whiskers. It stands now in the open street, visible to the man in the street, like some florid and magnificent tailor's dummy outside a tailor's shop. And it is borne in upon me, as a humble passer-by, that it is time that somebody kicked the stuffing out of it.¹

I believe I am strictly observing some of the most tenable tenets of psychoanalysis in not repressing this impulse. It is often suggested by these theorists that the most dreadful results may follow from the inhibition or secretion of such a movement of desire, and who knows what would happen to my moral inside if I really controlled my feelings at the sight of

a psychoanalyst? The psychological professor might appear to me in a dream, not to say a nightmare, and my whole life might be poisoned by obstructed passion and the sense of opportunities lost. It is far better to yield to the natural nervous stimulus, and liberate the natural human impulse, which may be done either by doubling up suddenly with laughter at the sight of the professor, or possibly by doubling the professor up, with some outward gesture appropriate to the occasion. But these suggestions may seem to some to be a little exaggerated, and even to savor of levity; so I will return to my main object in this essay—an object which, like the professor's, is quite serious, though perhaps not so solemn.

In current controversy the most sincere and convinced Darwinians are those who do not know what Darwinism is; and doubtless many are already practising psychoanalysis, with the utmost confidence and commercial success, in a similar condition of nescience about its nature. But in neither case, curiously enough, is it necessarily our first duty to decide what the word means or ought to mean. We are actually more concerned with the wrong use of such names and things than with the right use of them. The right use of them is a comparatively thin and theoretic

¹Since this was written, it has been done, more brilliantly than I can pretend to do it, by Miss Rose Macaulay, in "Dangerous Ages."

business, quite logical and legitimate in its place, but confined in that place to a very small company of competent specialists. The wrong use of them is a huge historical event, a revolution, a thing affecting thousands. The story of the South Sea Bubble is not told by tracing something that happened in an island in the South Seas. The important thing was not any far-off fact, but the central and civilized fable or delusion. Indeed, this is just as true when the excitement is not altogether a delusion. A man might live for a long time unperturbed by popular excitement about polar expeditions if he had taken the precaution of living at the north pole. But, in any case, a theory is only a thought, while a fashion is a fact. If certain things have really taken hold of the centers of civilization, they play quite as much a part in history whether their ultimate origin is a misapprehension or no. If certain mahatmas are being worshiped by everybody of importance in Paris and London, it is in practice a lesser matter whether they are suspected of heresy in the interior of Tibet. And if certain society dances, admittedly of African origin, are regarded as graceful and alluring by the aristocrats of Europe and America, it will make little difference that they would be regarded as obscene and degrading by the very cannibals of Africa.

The truth is that the nucleus of genuine psychological study has little or nothing to do with the fashion of psychoanalysis, just as the nucleus of genuine biological study had very little to do with the pantomime popularity of the missing link. In so far as that strictly scientific science really does exist, it has amid its high merits

certain marks which unfit it to be a fashion of this kind; just as a really subtle medical diagnosis could never express itself in a patent medicine. It has one mark, especially, which I have described more fully in another article, but which is fatal to it as a fashion. It is a characteristic of sincere scientific speculation that it *cannot* at any given moment be applied generally to public affairs except with the utmost caution and the most copious dilutions of common sense. This is because of the very nature of scientific inquiry, which, even when it does advance, advances by a sort of self-correcting curve that often brings it back almost to the place where it began. Considered as a process, it may be only fulfilling itself; but considered as a practical answer to a problem, it may come near to contradicting itself. To take this case of psychology in its most elementary example, science might incline to the view that counting does send a man to sleep; and then science might explain this by the fact that the first numerals are short words, or are very familiar and flowing ones, and science would be bound to add that these first numbers are very few, that the opposite examples are infinitely more numerous (the infinity being literal), that the expression "one thousand five hundred and ninety-seven" is not strictly speaking a monosyllable, and that few of us are familiar with the habit of asking for one hundred and seventy-three hats or two hundred and seventeen railway tickets. So science, following the same line of logic, would probably begin by telling us to count and end by telling us not to count. Similarly she would probably find special deflections in every special variation of it, as in

the common advice to the sleepless to count the sheep climbing a fence and falling into a ditch, or to count the society ladies going to call on a psychoanalyst.

Hence I am not concerned to deny that somewhere in the core of this craze, or more probably quite remote from it, there is some careful and solid work being done in the testing of memory, subconsciousness, and association of ideas. But exactly in so far as it is in this sense a fact, it is incapable of becoming in this sense a fashion. Nor do I deny, as will be seen later, that even the fashion itself is in some ways a healthy reaction against things even more unhealthy than itself. But for the moment I am writing of the only psychoanalysis of which everybody is talking; I might say of the only psychoanalysis of which anybody has heard. This is a reality, this is a thing of increasingly general experience, and this threatens to be a nonsensical nuisance and nothing else.

Before men analyze the uses of the unconscious mind, it may, perhaps, be well for them to discover the use of the mind; and before we come in this connection to any consideration of results, it may be well to say a word about methods. Now, the passages most eagerly quoted, from the thinkers most ardently admired, in this school of philosophy, are generally enough to show that whether or no they could theorize, they certainly could not think. One of them is admired and quoted for his theory of the character of *Hamlet*; according to which Hamlet not only hated his uncle (which even a mere literary critic, with no scientific training, might possibly be able to conjecture), but that he also secretly

hated his father simply for loving his mother. I know not what one is expected to do with this sort of thing except laugh, unless it be urged that it is inhumane to laugh at lunatics. The professor might just as well reconstruct the real, but rigidly concealed, character of *Ariel*, deducing it from the observed effects of hypnotism as probably practised by *Sycorax*. He might as well interpret the "Midsummer-Night's Dream" by psychoanalyzing the dreams of *Moth* and *Cobweb*. Few of us, I fancy, wish to be entangled in such cobwebs. Most of us would be decidedly relieved if *Puck*, another promising subject for psychoanalysis, would come with his broom to sweep such dust, not to say dirt, behind the door.

§ 2

There is another great phrase in the same play which will probably recur to the mind of any critic who thinks that criticism has any connection with common sense. "The best in this kind are but shadows," and *Hamlet* is only a gigantic shadow, even if he be the best in this kind. That a professor should earnestly attempt to dissect a shadow, to apply his scalpel to the inmost organs of a shadow, and show the hidden deformities of a shadow, is a sort of nightmare of unreality. It is a waking dream more monstrously incomprehensible than any of the sleeping dreams such doctors seek to comprehend. Even an unscientific scribbler may be permitted, as I say, to form his own opinion upon such a way of forming any opinions. He may be legitimately alarmed at the notion of such doctors applying their test to life as they apply it to literature. Another of

them noted some slip of the pen by a man who was putting off an unpleasant interview on the plea of "unforeseen difficulties" or some such phrase, and who found he had written "foreseen" instead of "unforeseen." This is gravely quoted as a proof of the existence and grand vigilant veracity of the great unconscious mind, which had suddenly snatched the pen from his hand and crossed out the negative prefix. In that case we can only say that the unconscious mind must be as bad a logician as the professor who is expounding it. For what the man really knew, in his conscience, was not that he had foreseen difficulties and neglected to remove them, but that he was going to tell a thumping lie in saying there were any difficulties at all.

But here again who can take such things seriously for a moment, or the judgment of anybody who thinks them serious? What does it matter how many facts the scientific specialist has collected, if these are the sort of facts he collects, and this is the sort of way he argues on them? The suggestion opens up a rather terrifying interpretation of the morality of misprints or clerical errors. Is any man who hastily writes "shooting peasants" when he means "shooting pheasants" to be looked on as a homicidal maniac? Is any careless or short-sighted person who puts "hat" instead of "had" to be treated as a sort of mad hatter, instead of a sane man momentarily talking through his hat? A misprint famous in Fleet Street made Mr. Gladstone say, "My honorable friend shaves his head" instead of "shakes his head"; was the printer a monomaniac not to be trusted with a razor? I myself have left out the second r in

"correspondent" in writing hastily about a respectable Nonconformist gentleman, so that it nearly came out in print as "co-respondent." Is it to be inferred that my subconscious mind was surging with a dreadful knowledge of his profligate life, or that the terrible truth ran through all my dreams, in which the Nonconformist was perpetually figuring in a dance of dissolute love-affairs and scandalous escapades? I give these merely as examples of an extravagant laxity in the mere process of reasoning, apart from its results; but we find very much the same untrustworthy logic and unconscious humor when we come to the results themselves.

§ 3

The mark of this sort of psychoanalyst is that he is always talking about complexes, and seems never to have heard of complexity. The first thing to note about the movement as a whole is that it is one of a historic series of such movements, which may be called the insane simplifications. Each of them took not so much a half-truth as a hundredth part of a truth, and then offered it not merely as something, but as everything. Having never done anything except split hairs, it hangs the whole world on a single hair.

Perhaps the first forerunners of this modern type were the Calvinists, who dug out the deep and most mysterious matter of divine foreknowledge, and forced it to the destruction of every other divine attribute; and their modern descendants, the determinists, who so denied all choice as to make it impossible even to choose what they called truth in preference to what they called falsehood. But a more recog-

nizable prototype was the disciple of the Utilitarians, who paraded their formula of universal self-interest with the same air of ruthless logic, though indeed the point was almost as verbal as a pun. Indeed, the Utilitarians used the word "self" very much as the psychoanalysts use the word "sex." The Calvinists, the Utilitarians, and all such men of one idea were pre-eminently intellectual bullies.

Their object in using these harsh and insufficient terms was a notion of making our flesh creep by giving ugly names to natural or ordinary things. It is obvious that the fulfilment of any ideal can be found only in a conscious soul, that is, in a self; and it tickled their vanity to make a sort of savage pun and call this selfishness. But it is obvious that if we so distend the meaning of a word as to say a man is self-indulgent when he wants to be burned alive, we are merely giving an illogical shock by using a bad word for what is better expressed in better words. In the same way it is obvious that if we spread an alleged atmosphere of sex over all natural expansion towards beauty and pleasure, we can really do it only by taking all the sting out of the word "sex," as the other took all the sting out of the word "self." In both cases the intellectual pleasure is on about the same level as that of a school-boy who frightens his little sisters by talking like an ogre about blood when he has cut his finger.

This same irrationality, which consists in taking what is at best a very minute, obscure, and doubtful part of the truth, and blazoning it abroad as the one all-sufficing truth, can be seen in the whole psychoanalytical business about the sexual character of all sorts of non-sexual affections. That the

sexual instinct is very strong is self-evident; and that it is often difficult to say how much it may faintly color other things is quite equally self-evident. But the way in which some psychoanalysts talk about the mother-complex would certainly indicate that a mother is rather too complex a thing for their intellects to analyze. Their tone amounts to the implication, not so much that there is such a thing as the sex-instinct, as that there is no such thing as the maternal instinct. On this theory a hen must be entirely indifferent to pullets and exclusively interested in cockerels. The male swallow or sparrow, when bringing food to the family nest, doubtless stipulates that it shall be distributed first to the female birds, while the mother promptly proceeds to reverse the process. These examples appear absurd, but they are not an atom more absurd, to any one with any experience of human families, than the implication that mothers do not care much about daughters or that fathers never concentrate on sons. The fact is that the general parental feeling, which is the one force running through nature, is also by far the most powerful and determining force running through human nature, in this connection; and all we can put to balance it, in the realities of experience and common sense, is that there may be, under certain conditions, a sort of shadow of sex sentiment mingling with the romance of any affection in the perfectly innocent and even frivolous sense of an interest in the other sex. The proportions of it are imperceptible and probably invisibly small, but it is the whole point of such monomaniac schools of thought that they care nothing whatever about propor-

tion. The thing which is new for them always bulks big in the universe, without any reference to what is true for everybody. For the rest, any sane man will certainly say that this, if it exists, is a part of the unconscious mind which had much better remain unconscious. But it is yet another mark of this sort of agnostic that he is ready to assert his absolute knowledge of everything to the verge of a contradiction in terms. Just as he will always try to write a history of prehistoric man, so he will always struggle to be conscious of his own unconsciousness. And behind all this, as behind the diabolism of the Calvinist and the materialism of the Utilitarian, there is in many cases a mood or a motive which is simply a silly pleasure in brutality and blasphemy. The same sort of thrill that was given by saying that most men were damned, or that all men were selfish, is given by suggesting, however absurdly, that holy motherhood or the love of little children has in it something of the unearthly darkness of *Œdipus*.

§ 4

Even in these unnatural schools, doubtless, this mood is rare, and generally, to use their own favorite word, unconscious. But the same parallel can be found in many political and ethical schools of recent times, and in connections that are cleaner, if quite equally pedantic. Just as it is the latest fad to prove that everything is sexual, so it was the last fad but one to prove that everything was economic. The Marxian notion, called the materialist theory of history, had the same sort of stupid self-confidence in its very insufficient materialism. As the one fad conceives everything

about the bird to be connected with mating, so the other conceived everything connected with it to consist of catching worms. It would be inadequate even about birds, and we ourselves are not limited to a taste for catching worms and still less for being worms. But the most vital answer was, of course, that birds have no history, but only natural history. In so far as it is true that birds do nothing but feed and breed, they do nothing worthy of record, and nothing is recorded; and that is why we have no great historical works on the "Golden Deeds of Goldfinches" or "The Lives of Famous Larks." The whole type of thought in both cases rests on an intellectual confusion between the constant conditions of living and the determining motives of life. It is obvious that life could not continue if sex and food were entirely absent, but that has nothing in the world to do with how frequently they are present. It had certainly nothing to do with how frequently they are present as motives explaining decisive events. It is exactly as if we were to say that because a man stands everywhere or goes anywhere supported on two legs, therefore his two legs are his only interests in life. It is like suggesting that his whole heaven must be in the contemplation and admiration of his legs; that if he runs to catch a train, it must be to exercise his legs, or if he looks to inherit a fortune, it must be to buy boots. Certainly man can only stand on the earth and advance down the ages on the two physical supports of alimentation and reproduction, but that he is perpetually thinking about these things is not only flatly contradicted by the whole of his history, but is really incon-

sistent with his having any history. It was said of *Sir Willoughby Patterne* that he had a leg, and we may even make the bold scientific inference that he had two legs; but if there were nothing but two legs, there would be no romance called "The Egoist." And if there were nothing but these material supports, there would be no romance called "The Roman Empire" or "The Crusades" or "The French Revolution" or "The Great War."

In the case of the materialist theory of history reason has already begun to return even to the materialist. The shrewdest and most hard-headed of the Marxians, such as that very virile veteran, Mr. Hyndman, have already seen through and corrected this very crude economic formula. Even the wildest and most dehumanized of the Marxians are no longer talking very much about the materialist theory of history; in their own realm of Russia, indeed, they are talking mostly about the necessity of strike-breaking and servile labor. The monomania of economic history is already passing, as the monomania of utilitarianism had passed before it, and the monomania of Calvinistic determinism before that. It was time for another monomania to appear.

The monomania of the omnipresence of sex, like the last monomania of the omnipresence of economics, could easily be refuted at length and at large; for the purposes of brevity either is best referred to the daily experience of any ordinary man. Just as any ordinary man who has fallen in love, or got drunk with his friends, or gone for a walk in the country, knows that there are a number of normal motives that are not economic, so any grown man who has ever looked

with pleasure at a little boy of three or four knows that the father-complex is all nonsense, and that his pleasure is mingled of many things which psychoanalysis does not analyze, but largely of something of which psychoanalysis would seem to be quite unaware—the sense of the absurd. In a very short time, no doubt, everybody will be pointing out these palpable absurdities in the current psychological fashion, just as they are already beginning to point out the absurdities in the last economic fashion, and have long been pointing out those in the former economic fashion and the yet earlier theological fashion. These fads fade very fast, and it may seem hardly worth while to prick bubbles that will burst of themselves.

Nevertheless, there is one consideration that makes it worth while. It is a character of all these manias that they cannot really convince the mind, but they do cloud it. Above all, they do darken it. All these tremendous and rather temporary discoveries have had the singular fascination that they were not merely degrading, but were also depressing. Each in turn leaves no trace on the true and serious conclusions of the world. But each in turn may leave very deep and disastrous wounds and dislocations in the mentality of the individual man. Calvinism is dead, but not before Cowper died of it. In short, the real case against the new psychology is purely psychological. Where it is not worth watching as a science, it is worth watching as a disease. Perhaps, however, the best simile is that of the watch kept beside a restless sleeper, tossing in fever or delirium in which one delusion chases another. These things in very truth are of such stuff

as dreams are made of, and never more than when they themselves seek for signs and portents in dreams. A nightmare is never true and a nightmare is never lasting, but it always towers above the stars and occupies heaven and earth while it lasts. It would be a kindness to give people a passing pinch to wake them up.

§ 5

Of course there are other things in psychoanalysis besides this craze for reading the single sexual instinct into all sorts of other instincts and ideas. Of some of them, perhaps, I may write more generally on another occasion, and I will only briefly refer to them here. The *idée fixe* about the indirect influence of sex is sufficiently typical of the trend of such things and the main truth about them. For the main truth about psychoanalysis is simply that it is not analysis. It does not really analyze at all, for to analyze is to resolve a reality into all its constituents. In the case of the soul this cannot be done perfectly, and these doctors do it much more imperfectly even than it might be done. They find their favorite cause in cases where it would be the business of an analyst to find five or six causes, and their complexes really remain complex. But above all they are dealing with a complex which must remain more complex than the cosmos itself.

The other great subject matter of psychoanalysis, besides the sex instinct, is the unconscious mind. It is self-evident that nobody can analyze the unconscious mind. Nobody can cut up the whole of it into the smallest pieces, count all the pieces, and be certain that none is missing. The most we can do is to become aware of

the thing, or of adumbrations of the thing, much as psychic investigators claim to do of the psychic world, not even knowing whether the things seen are significant or insignificant as compared with the things not seen. Indeed, it is obvious that among the possibilities of a subconscious mind are all the psychic possibilities. The moment a thing is outside the lighted circle of consciousness, we cannot be certain what allies it has in the darkness. Indeed, we cannot even be certain whether it belongs to us or not. If a prompting comes from nowhere of which we are conscious, obviously we cannot even be conscious that it comes only from our own unconsciousness. So far as we know it is news from nowhere, and so far as we merely guess it might be news from anywhere. We cannot conjecture the mere existence of an undiscovered country, and then calmly map out the frontier between that undiscovered country and another undiscovered country. We are improving on the philosopher who said that the snark was a boojum, merely by asserting on our own authority that the snark is strictly forbidden to be a boojum. That is all we are rationalistically entitled to say of the region beyond our conscious reason, that it may contain anything from heaven to hell.

Turn from this to the fantastic fashion-plate now in vogue in which the subconscious man is already photographed as huge and hairy as his predecessor, the missing link, now, alas! no more. The minor poetry, the fashionable fiction, the talk of the drawing-room, and the tags of the newspaper are full of some ridiculous mythology about every man having inside him a sort of aged and micro-

cephalous monkey. Wistful and melancholy poems are written about how trying it is for a man to have a monkey inside him, and ethical essays earnestly debate whether the man should own the monkey or the monkey the man. Men are forgetting that unconsciousness is unconscious, exactly as they forgot that the missing link was missing. They are making a picture of the subconscious man exactly as they made a picture of the superman. In the existing atmosphere of the thing, if it does not indeed pass like a fashion, it can only remain as a superstition. The modern world may or may not recover a religion, but it is rapidly making a mythology.

§ 6

It is with this mythology that I have been dealing here, as threatening to be a superstition fit for savages, and not with the minimum of true medicinal treatment for the mind, which would require another sort of article to itself. Even in that subject of the medicine there would be too much that savors of the medicine-man. But I do not at all deny that, in the hands of men truly scientific and preferably sane, much may be done in the disentangling of morbid memories or unnatural associations. But by far the best case for this better side of the business is to be found in another historical retrospect, of the time before Calvinism began the dance of the modern monomanias. Our civilization before the Calvinist philosophy was possessed of the Catholic philosophy. The Puritans destroyed the institutions of medieval Christianity one after another, and the moderns have been driven to restore them one after another. The only difference is

that the same thing which had a moderate medieval form generally has an extravagant modern form. The cult of feminism has made nonsense of the protests against Mariolatry. There are wild Protestant sects in America at this moment, which would still probably refuse honor to the Mother of God, while they are already asking why God is not called a mother. The cult of estheticism made nonsense of the protests against ritualism. William Morris actually put on his wall-papers the symbols that Christians were forbidden to put on their walls, and because men might not say the Litany of the Virgin reverently, Swinburne rewrote it for them blasphemously, and addressed it to a harlot. Because it was superstitious of the monks to practise communism on a small scale, everybody is commanded by the Bolsheviks to practise it on a colossal scale; and because we destroyed democratic guilds that were conservative, we are rewarded with trades-unions that are revolutionary. The modern world rejected as incredible the medieval miracles that were worked by relics and holy places, and has gone off to work its own miracles with tables and tambourines; it has denied that a dead man could possibly have a glorified body, and lived to hear its most eminent scientists saying that he can have a glorified golf-club and a glorified brandy and soda. There is not a single one of the institutions denounced and destroyed as parts of medieval society that has not by this time been painfully parodied as a part of modern society. There was perhaps only one lacking, and it has now been supplied. Psychoanalysis is the restoration of the confessional.

The modern world has really suffered from a monstrous burden of secrecy. Perpetually talking of enlightenment and public opinion, it has had more privacy in the bad sense than any previous age. Its conservative politics are sustained by secret party funds, its revolutionary politics by secret societies. In emotional matters it has grown still more stagnant and poisonous, and the healthiest aspect of the new psychology is that it is the bursting of that secretion.

On the practical side the comparison remains the same. Whether or not it can do all the alleged good that the confessional does, it could certainly do all the alleged harm that the confes-

sional was accused of doing. It confesses to every count in the old indictment: the unseemliness of the subject matter, the possible unworthiness of the recipient. Indeed, the vulgar charge is much plainer against a casual experimentalist than against a self-dedicated celibate. A priest may be a systematic profligate and break his vows, but it is not immediately obvious why a systematic profligate should have any vows to break. But all this comparison is beyond the question here; it is enough to say that in this also the modern world dubiously copies the medieval world, which is furiously condemned. And that if this be a fault, it is the nearest the thing comes to a virtue.

To Charmian, Unborn

BY LOIS SEYSTER MONTROSS

My body folded tawny wings
 To walk with slow, uncertain feet;
 My body put off silken things
 For linen, humble and discreet;

My songs that were as butterflies,
 So frail they bore but phantom gold,
 Cling to the earth, and dare not rise
 Out of the withered grass and mold;

My laugh is dumb that fluttered wild,
 My hands are bare of shining rings,
 My soul goes fasting that a child
 Be born for silk and song and wings.