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MNEMIC PSYCHOLOGY

Mnemonic Psychology

BY

RICHARD SEMON

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

BELLA DUFFY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

VERNON LEE



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INTRODUCTION

BEING NOTES ON SOME APPLICATIONS OF *MNEMIC*
PRINCIPLE IN RECENT PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

BY

VERNON LEE

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I

SEMON, HERING AND BUTLER

THE *Mnemische Empfindungen*, of which Miss Bella Duffy has given us the following excellent translation, was intended by the late Dr. Richard Semon as the first of a series of applications and confirmations of the principles laid down in his *Mneme*.¹ His tragic death, and perhaps the war to whose outcome it was partly due, caused that programme to remain unexecuted. And, except a small volume of controversy on the "Transmissibility of Individual Modifications" and a posthumous fragment on the "Correlation of Cerebral and Mental Phenomena" (*Bewusstseinsvorgang und Gehirnprozess*, Wiesbaden 1920), the *Mneme* (translated by Mr. Louis Simon) and this present work are all that stands for what was intended as a kind of mnemic biology, or even of mnemic philosophy. So, as the two works are complete, each in itself, Semon having quoted from his earlier work whatever he deemed necessary in the later one, I have ventured to suppress in this English translation the sub-title "First Continuation of Mneme." Moreover, I have altered the title from "Mnemic Sensations" to "Mnemic Psychology," which seems more appropriate to its contents, and in so far more suited

¹ Richard Semon, born in Berlin 1859, was a pupil of Haeckel, and studied medicine in order to take part in a scientific expedition to Lagos. He travelled also in Australia, leaving an English account of his journey and observations, which was published by Macmillan. *Mneme* was first published in 1904, and had three editions. The *Mnemische Empfindungen* appeared in 1909. He lost his wife at Easter 1918, and, three days after Christmas of the same year, shot himself through the heart in her bedroom.

to bring it into the hands of those English readers who can profit by it most. And at the same time put it beyond the reach of certain criticisms and polemics which do not rightly apply to it, however much they may do so to the mainly biological and only incidentally psychological earlier volume, namely the *Mneme*.

For in that first book, which has, to my mind, some of the suggestiveness and charm of Darwin's works, Semon advocated the views concerning Memory and Heredity with which many of us English lay readers are familiar, thanks to the literary genius and incomparably challenging personality of Samuel Butler. Happening to be a professional physiologist and naturalist instead of a fantastic novelist turned amateur evolutionist, Semon naturally never set up Heredity as an unconscious racial Memory; still less could he dream of the mythological developments which came natural to the author of *Erewhon*. So far was Semon from any such identification of Heredity with Memory, that while the earlier physiologist by whom such an identification was started, namely Ewald Hering, had entitled his brilliant little essay "Memory considered as a Universal Function of Organic Matter,"¹ Semon deliberately discarded the word and the concept *Memory* from this reference, and invented a new name and a new definition for his subject-matter, calling his first book: "*Mneme*, being the principle of conservation in the mutability of all organic happenings."²

So much for the difference between Semon and Butler, and Semon and Hering. What I really require to deal with is the difference between Semon's first work and the

¹ "Über das Gedächtnis als eine allgemeine Funktion der organisierten Materie, vortrag von Ewald Hering," May 1871 (translated by Samuel Butler as appendix to his "Unconscious Memory"). There have been two separate new editions of Hering's essay in the last few years; one in Leipzig, 1921, in the series of Ostwald's *Klassiker der exakten Wissenschaften*.

² *Die Mneme, als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens*. 3rd Edition. Leipzig, 1911. English translation by Louis Simon.

second one (of which this volume is the translation)—since upon this difference depends my wish to keep the two works (both published in English by Messrs. G. Allen & Unwin) rigorously separate; moreover also my alteration in the title of this translation of the second one. This new title of my finding is intended to emphasize that, unlike the *Mneme*, which is, as a whole, biological, the present volume is a work of pure psychology. The facts and the theories it sets forth are in no wise dependent upon Semon's contention that memory and heredity are two aspects of the same organic function. Neither, as a consequence, is the contents of *Mnemonic Psychology* in the very least affected by the hostile attitude which latter-day biologists have almost unanimously taken up against any such bringing together of memory and heredity, because of the alleged inheritance of individually acquired modifications upon which such a hypothesis rests. If I may judge by the summing-up of Professor J. Arthur Thomson,¹ Mr. Carr Saunders, Mr. J. Huxley² and those contained in Mr. Bateson's *Problems of Genetics*, the resemblance between parents and offspring is adequately accounted for by processes in the germinal substance, and neither require, nor show any signs of, such *somatic induction* of individual responses to environment as Semon believed in; indeed, to the lay mind, genetic phenomena stand in need less of a "principle of Conservation" than of a principle of innovation wherewith to account for the minimum of variation requisite for natural selection to

¹ J. Arthur Thomson, *The Control of Life*, 1921.
Carr Saunders, *The Population Problem*, 1922.
Bateson, *Problems of Genetics*, 1916.

² Julian Huxley, F.R.S., reviewing the English translation of *Mneme*, and also reviewing *Initiative in Evolution* by Walter Kidd, M.D., F.R.S.E., 1922. The last-named is in favour of *transmissibility*, as are also: Prof. E. W. MacBride; "The Inheritance of Acquired Characters" in *Science Progress*, January¹1921; and Prof. Eugenio Rignano, *Sulla Trasmissibilità dei Caratteri Acquisiti*, Bologna, 1907, and in *Scientific Synthesis*, London, 1910.

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