

POINTS OF VIEW

BY THE BY: THE ETERNAL CHILD

In 1809, John Haslam, apothecary to Bethlem Hospital, wrote this case history, which for reasons of space, I have had to abridge.

In the month of July 1803, my opinion was requested respecting a young gentleman, ten years of age, who was sent here, accompanied by a kind and decent young man; to take care of him . . . The parents are of sound mind and they do not remember any branches of their respective families to have been (in any manner) disordered in their intellects . . . At the age of two years . . . (he) became so mischievous and uncontrollable, that he was sent from home to be nursed by his aunt. In this situation, at the request of his parents, and with the concurrence of his relation, he was indulged in every wish, and never corrected for any perverseness or impropriety of conduct. Thus he continued until he was nearly nine years old, the create of volition and the terror of the family. At the suggestion of the physician . . . a person was appointed to watch over him. It being the opinion of the doctor that the case originated in over-indulgence and perverseness, a different system of management was adopted. The superintendent was ordered to correct him for each individual impropriety. At this time the boy would neither dress or undress himself, though capable of doing both; when his hands were at liberty, he tore his clothes; he broke everything that was presented to him, or which came within his reach, and frequently refused to take food. He gave answers only to such questions as pleased him, and acted in opposition to every direction. The superintendent exercised this plan for several months, but perhaps not to the extent laid down; for it may be presumed, that after a few flagellations his humanity prevailed over the medical hypothesis. When he became the subject of my own observation, he was of a very healthy appearance . . . His tongue was unusually thick though his articulation was perfectly distinct. His countenance was decidedly maniacal. His stature, for his age, was short, but he was well compacted, and possessed great bodily strength. Although his skin was smooth and clear, it was deficient in its usual sensibility; he bore the whip and the cane with less evidence of pain than other boys. Another circumstance convinced me of this fact. During the time he resided in

London, he was troubled with a boil on his leg; various irritating applications were made to the tumour, and the dressings were purposely taken off with less nicety than usual, yet he never complained. His appetite was good, but not inordinate and he bore the privation of food for a considerable time without uneasiness.

He had a very retentive memory . . . Few circumstances appeared to give him pleasure, but he would describe very correctly anything which had delighted him. As he wanted the power of continued attention, and was only attracted by fits and starts, it may be naturally supposed he was not taught letters, and still less, that he would copy them. He had been several times to school, and was the hopeless pupil of many masters, distinguished for their patience and rigid discipline; it may be concluded that from these gentlemen, he had derived all the benefits which could result from privations to his stomach, and from the application of the rod to the more delicate parts of his skin.

On the first interview I had with him, he contrived, after two or three minutes acquaintance, to break a window and tear the frill of my shirt. He was an unrelenting foe to all china, glass and crockery ware; whenever they came within his reach he shivered them instantly. In walking the street, the helper was compelled to take the wall, as he uniformly broke the windows if he could get near them, and this operation he performed so dextrously, and with such safety to himself, that he never cut his fingers. To tear lace and destroy the finer textures of female ornament, seemed to gratify him exceedingly, and he seldom walked out without finding an occasion of indulging this propensity. He never became attached to any inferior animal, a benevolence so common to the generality of children; to these creatures his conduct was that of a brute: he oppressed the feeble, and avoided the society of those more powerful than himself. Considerable practice had taught him that he was the cat's master, and whenever this luckless animal approached him he plucked out its whiskers with wonderful rapidity; to use his own language, 'I must have her beard off'. After this operation, he commonly threw the creature on the fire, or through the window. If a little dog came near him, he kicked it, if a large one he would not notice it. When he was spoken to, he usually said, 'I do not choose to answer'. When he perceived any one who appeared to observe him attentively, he always said, 'Now, I will look unpleasant.' The usual games of children afforded him no amusement; whenever boys were at play he never joined them; indeed the most singular part of his character was, that he appeared incapable of forming a friendship with anyone: he felt no considerations for sex, and would as readily kick or bite a girl as a boy. Of any kindness shown him, he was equally insensible; he would receive an orange as a present, and afterwards throw it in the face of the donor . . .

That same young gentleman, four foot nothing, stepped out of Haslam's book into our small department many months ago. We didn't recognize him straightaway, not for the first ten minutes anyway. Hands held loosely in front of him, he paced slowly round the room eyeing us up and down from shoe tip to crown, with benevolent curiosity. Then he delicately dabbed at furniture as if valuating it for a Sotheby auction. Inspection over, he upended a large cupboard it had taken two porters to move into place. As the sugar, coffee, limbless dolls and mismatched hospital crockery spilled and rattled across the floor he upended a client, who was momentarily and most unusually minding her own business, on top of the debris. For all his mental handicap, Sean (not his real name) is gifted at creating maximum havoc with minimum effort. We've never seen him break into a glow, far less a sweat.

There have been changes of course, since Haslam first described him. Gone is the decidedly maniacal look. Instead, there is an angelic smile which makes it so easy to ignore the ominous clicking of his perfect teeth. We don't have luckless cats, rods or canes. Food deprivation doesn't figure in our treatment model. Some of the glass we have is reinforced. Sean doesn't bother much with other clients unless they get in his way.

But he cannot abide the sort of orderliness we take for granted - table and chairs the right way up, drink in a cup, toys on a table, people inside clothes. He has an obsession about adult dignity - the more there is of it, the more he wants to demolish it. Kick, nip-and-twist till the skin breaks, spit and bite: 24 possible combinations, all of them highly effective. Despite advice, well-dressed lady visitors are inexorably drawn to the little fellow, then hobble away clutching at their chests and clawing for blouse buttons on the floor.

I couldn't understand why, apart from the fact that we had inherited Haslam's boy, I was so fascinated by the case history. Then I saw why: his pen picture is far more graphic, far more rounded, than any case history I've ever written, than any video we've ever made of our clients. I don't seriously question the need for interval recording, for event recording, for completing scales. But the nett effect is to dismember clients and dry them flat between pages.

Then there's the language we use. Whereas Haslam's was robust, detailed and accurate, ours tends to be flabby, lazy and pseudo-scientific. Sean is non-compliant. For some mysterious reason we cannot say he is disobedient. I don't understand. Does 'disobedience' have a dubious biblical connotation? In older readers' minds does it smack of the tawse?

In a case history I wrote seven years ago I said Jimmy Smith's behaviour was 'autistic-like'. I can't remember a thing about him - there's no face, no mannerism, no voice. 'Autistic-like' probably means that he reminded me of some other child whom some other professional had described as being autistic-like. Either that or I had used two questionnaires which flatly contradicted each other. 'Hyperactive' probably means I've seen the child running around but I can't tell you exactly what he was doing.

Is the art of writing case histories long since gone? I suspect it has. Is it worth reviving? Most certainly. Suppose Haslam had been successful in his treatment of the

young gentleman with whatever means he had at his disposal and were ethically acceptable at that time - venesection, flowers of zinc, whatever. Imagine, with his powers of description, what the before-and-after report would have been like. His young gentleman lives on. To prove it, he's our 'client' now. The pity of it is that I had to rely on Haslam's account because I can't write a decent case history myself.

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Reference

Haslam, J. *Observations on Madness and Melancholy.* A. Hayden of London, 1809.