

PSYCHIATRIC PROBLEMS IN OPHTHALMOLOGY

Edited by

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Select representatives of both the fields of ophthalmology and psychiatry have collaborated to produce this valuable discussion of common emotionally related ophthalmic problems, such as psychosomatic illness, reactions to sudden blindness, and emotional traumas related to surgery. This monograph will be of interest not only to the ophthalmologist who wishes to become a more effective and sensitive diagnostician, but to the host of counselors, psychiatrists, social workers, and special educators who wish to increase their understanding of this form of emotional illness.

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PREFACE

It has been said that, because of its preciseness, ophthalmology escapes the multitude of psychosomatic patients who deluge the general practitioner's or internist's office. Nothing really could be farther from the truth. As a specialty, ophthalmology has its great share of psychiatric and psychosomatic related problems. However, they are frequently missed or ignored by the ophthalmologist.

This compilation of articles on selected psychiatric problems for the ophthalmologist is not intended as a sweeping review of psychosomatic ophthalmic problems. Instead, we have gathered together topics which we feel are relatively common, often exasperating, but important for the ophthalmologist to be aware of and to add to his interest and abilities as a diagnostician.

The Editors

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**PSYCHIATRIC
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OPHTHALMOLOGY**

Chapter 1

THE EYE AND "I"

SHERWIN H. SLOAN, M.D. AND CHARLES W. WAHL, M.D.

SHERLOCK HOLMES, in one of his stories, described a way in which a person can be made to reveal his most treasured possession. "Yell 'fire' " he said, "and a mother will rush to save her children, and a maiden her jewels." You may recall that he solved a puzzling case in this way.

Similarly, when man is faced unexpectedly by the threat of physical injury, he instinctively covers his genitalia with one hand and shields his eyes with the other. The "balls" and the "eyeballs" are thus linked together in the unconscious mind by more than a play on words (Fig. 1-1). For the eyes are our most precious and valued physical possessions, being as they are, our windows into the world. It is therefore not surprising, as numerous studies have shown, that most people would rather sustain any injury or loss than endure blindness. This being so, it is not hard to understand why the eye therefore occupies a place in our body-image and internal conception of ourselves that is unique and unparalleled in psychic life.

The eye, in all times and all ages, has been very central in man's interests in, and awe concerning, himself and his function. This archaic primacy is evident today in the way a schizophrenic child will draw a fixed and central eye into the inchoate and formless deliniation of a sketch of the human face. He shows through this and other evidence that the eye is the seat and essence of the person and even with the loss of every other aspect of the body-image, the "eye" is equated with the "I" or the self. In this he shares a belief with the ancient Egyptians who in their Eye of Horus formed a concept of an apotropaic power that protected against all evil and magically ensured success, a talisman which the physician uses even today each time he employs the symbol R_{\times} from which it is directly

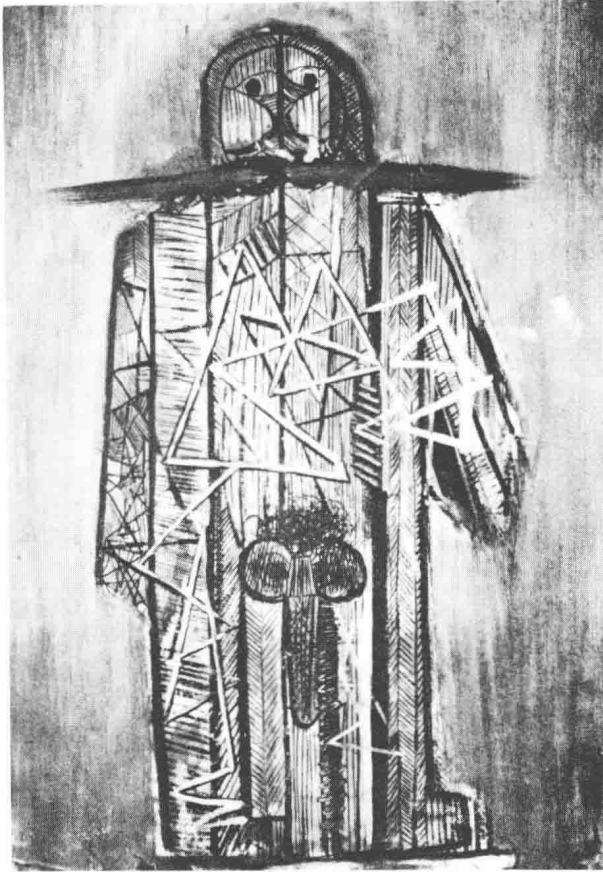


Figure 1-1. A figure of a man by Victor Brauner showing the artistic link between the "balls" and the "eyeballs".

derived (Fig. 1-2). In the mythopoesis of races, in the concepts of a schizophrenic child and the unconscious of all of us, we learn that the eye is envisioned not as a receptive organ but a protective one (Fig. 1-3). Vestiges of this concept are evident in our speech. We speak of a "darting, withering or piercing glance," or "transfixing with a stare". All readers of the comic strip *Lil' Abner*® know of the effect of the "double whammy". This paleological concept is used by the hypnotist who has learned that asking the subject to fixate upon his eye is more



Figure 1-2. The Egyptian Eye of Horus.

likely to induce a rapid hypnosis than having the patient stare at a pencil eraser. And are we all not somewhat influenced by the popular belief that a steady gaze and a clear eye are prime indicators of inner strength, honesty and steadfastness of purpose? Even today, the Italian peasant shuns the individual with ophthalmia since, as a rheumy eye indicates the *mal occhio* or "evil eye", such a person is to be feared and hated (Fig. 1-4). Edgar Allan Poe, in his story, "The Tell-Tale Heart", describes a man who kills another and who gives as his reason, "I think it was first his eye that made me hate the old man."

To the ophthalmologist, knowledge of the symbolic representations of the eye becomes indispensable to the understanding and evaluation of various eye symptoms. The general ophthalmologist's office has its large share of patients with symptoms from the nonspecific itchy burning eye to the patient with a profound depression following an enucleation. Submerged beneath the obvious and accessible complaints may lie the more symbolic and unconscious conflicts and associations

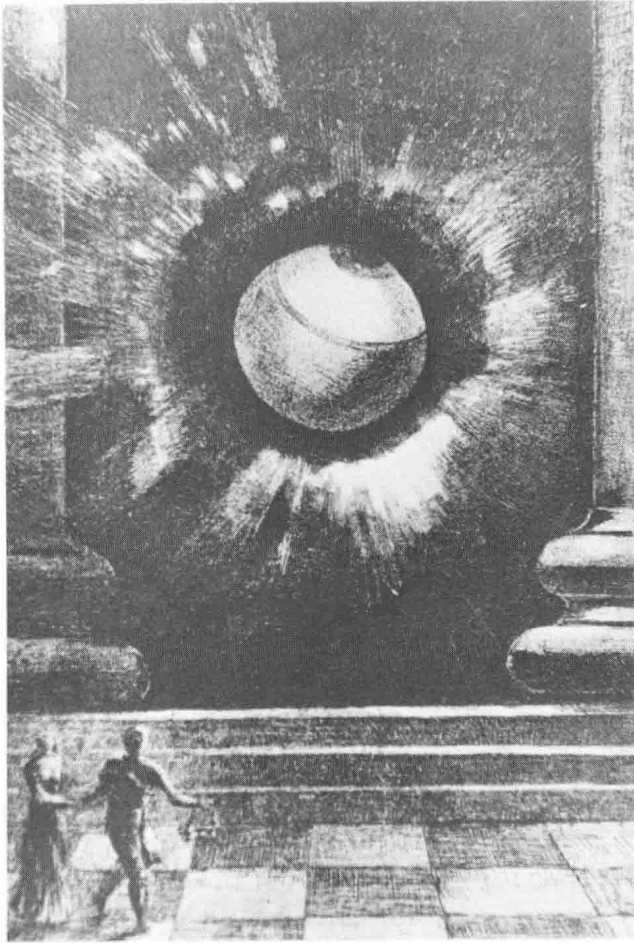


Figure 1-3. Redon's depiction of the great all-protective eye.

that contribute to or make up the total etiology of the symptom.

There is a saying: "A beautiful eye makes silence eloquent; a kind eye makes contradiction an assent. This member gives life to every part of us." What happens when this member no longer sees or when this member is removed? To a patient undergoing the possibility or accomplishment of one of the above the loss can be equated with death. In fact, to the

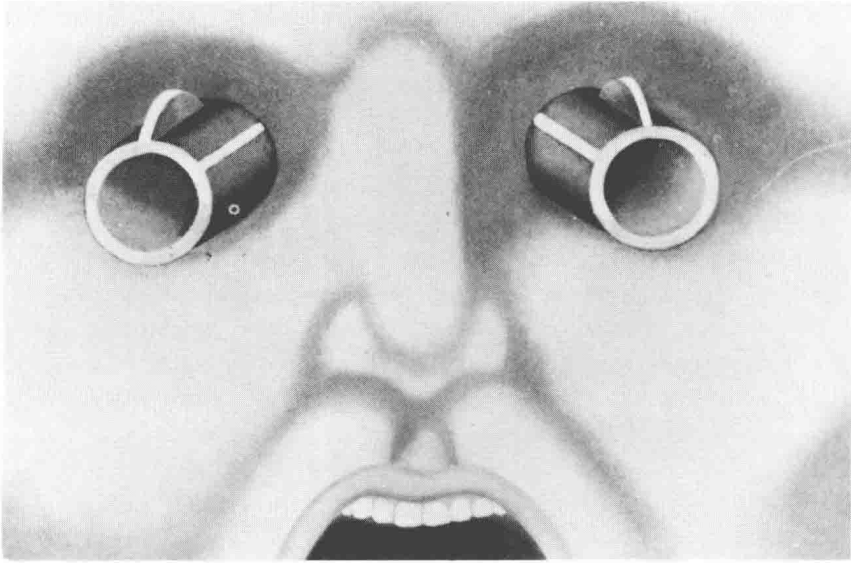


Figure 1-4. An artistic manifestation of the power of the evil and destructive eye.

ophthalmologist, blindness becomes equivalent to ophthalmic death. An internist loses the battle when the patient dies. The ophthalmic patient lives but he, as well as his ophthalmologist, may react violently to this ophthalmic death.

The image one has of his body or his worth may be analogous to the image one has on his retina. The total lack of a retinal image or a greatly diminished one may produce equivalent feelings of diminished personal worth. A "dead eye" may mean a dead man. Universally, primitive peoples have looked upon the eye as having a very special and mysterious quality and the primitive concepts of the eye and its relationship to death are numerous. It is almost instinctive for members of the medical and paramedical fields, as well as relatives of one who has recently died, to close the deceased's eyes as soon as the pronouncement is made. There is an old Jewish custom of covering the mirrors in the home of a person recently deceased lest that person look back at us from previous reflections.

Artists, philosophers and psychologists long have envisioned various ways in which the eye may represent aspects of our psychic lives. To illustrate the preceding comments, let us look at what has been evident to artists regarding the symbolism of the eye.

The concept of the "evil eye" has been with the human race quite a long time. A masterful dissertation on this subject is presented in Gifford's book, *The Evil Eye*. There is virtually no culture studied without some traces of the evil eye concept. The thought that the eye is capable of projecting the evil thoughts of its owner is one of the most ancient and universal ocular superstitions. An evil mind, most likely, must have an evil eye. St. Matthew (6:22, 23) expressed some of the thoughts of Jesus as: "The light of the body is in the eye: if therefore thine eye be single (that is sound), thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness."

One might imagine that concepts in the belief of the evil eye have greatly diminished with modern technology and the space age. If one takes another look at the great increase recently in the occult, astrology and the devil, it is evident that these ideas have not disappeared from modern society.

Diverse and miraculous are the effects which have been attributed to the evil eye. The belief in the evil eye has undergone fascinating elaboration through the ages. The imagination of man, reasoning from an original false premise and motivated by fear of harm and hope of protection, developed a core of belief which is still with us in nearly all parts of the world. The power to inflict evil has been ascribed to entire races or religious sects, to animals and mythical creatures, to demons and spirits. This myth contains a profound truth because the difference between animal and human aggression is that man is able to plan to inflict evil on his fellow being.

The evil eye could sometimes be recognized as an inflamed or squinting orb, and this superstition was downright dangerous for any person who happened to be cross-eyed, or had inflamed or reddened eyes. It is not surprising that endless fantasies have been woven around the first organ of influence and fascination

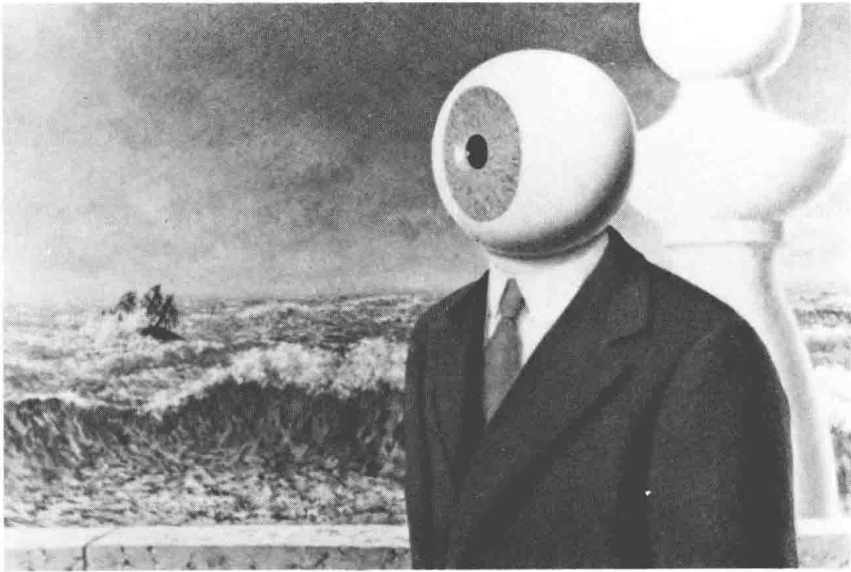


Figure 1-5. Magritte's view of the eye as the totality of the human soul.

— the eye as a mirror of the soul (Fig. 1-5). Witches, demons and devils use fascination to full advantage in casting an evil spell (Figs. 1-6, 1-7). There are schizophrenic patients who are firmly convinced that they can kill with one terrible look. Jean-Paul Sartre once remarked that if man's gaze could fertilize women, they would all be continually pregnant. Certainly, the eyes betray what we are thinking and feeling.

That the eye can exude and impart evil does not mean that it cannot also embody a symbol of protection from evil.

As much as the eye has been associated with evil, it has also provided comfort, solace and protection against evil.

Primitive man, faced with the difficult and uncooperative forces of nature, created gods to whom he could appeal to preside over the uncertainties of his life. The Egyptians created the eye god Horus to provide comfort and answers. This Egyptian god, who once suffered the loss of an eye, symbolizes and