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# Art Imitates Life: *Déjà vu* Experiences in Prose and Poetry

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The *déjà vu* experience is a subjective phenomenon that has been described in many novels and poems. Here we review over 20 literary descriptions. These accounts are consistent with the data obtained from psychiatric literature, including various phenomenological, aetiological and psychopathogenetic aspects of the *déjà vu* experience. The explanations, explicitly formulated by creative authors, include reincarnation, dreams, organic factors and unconscious memories. Not infrequently, an association with defence or organic factors is demonstrable on the basis of psychoanalytic or clinical psychiatric interpretation. The authors recommend that psychiatrists be encouraged to overstep the limits of psychiatric literature and read prose and poetry as well.

> "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." William Wordsworth (1800; p. 266)

For information on subjective experiences, the psychiatrist is largely dependent on the patient's ability to put these experiences into words. Novelists and poets excel in precisely this ability to depict subjective experiences. As Baudry (1990) puts it: "Poets or creative writers can have very insightful glimpses into the unconscious; they may be able to convey in a condensed fashion something that we struggle to articulate in a much more cumbersome fashion".

A subjective phenomenon that has been described in any number of novels and poems is the *déjà vu* experience. This experience is defined as "any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience, with an undefined past" (Neppe, 1983). In a recent paper, Sno & Linszen (1990) detailed the clinical features, epidemiology, aetiology and psychopathogenesis of the *déjà vu* experience by reviewing the psychiatric literature.

In the present paper, the authors review 24 literary descriptions of the phenomenon. This is of course a limited, and to some extent arbitrary, selection based on literary preference and on passages previously quoted by psychiatric authors. We begin with quotations containing explicitly formulated explanations. We then focus on descriptions of *déjà vu* experiences whose explanations have been derived from the context.

## Explicit explanations

On 17 February 1828, Sir Walter Scott (1890), the famous British author of historical novels, made the following entry in his journal:

> ". . . that yesterday at dinner-time I was strangely haunted by what I would call the sense of pre-existence, – videlicet, a confused idea that nothing that passed was said for the first time, that the same topics had been discussed, and the same persons had stated the same opinions on the same subjects." (p. 124)

Scott's impression of familiarity pertains to every last detail. The author proceeds to compare the phenomenon to a mirage. He also likens it to the giddiness following a profuse loss of blood, "when one feels as if walking on a feather-bed, and could not find a secure footing".

Scott contemplates various explanations for his "confused idea". As witnessed by the term "sense of pre-existence", he seems to associate the phenomenon with reincarnation. He also suggests organic factors and unconscious memories as possible explanations. The organic factors are related to fatigue and to his having had several glasses of wine. The unconscious memories have to do with the fact that he has spent many previous evenings with the same group of old friends.

Like Scott, most of the literary authors who have formulated explicit explanations associate the *déjà vu* experience with reincarnation. The other explanations Scott considers, organic factors and unconscious memories, have also been suggested by various authors. In addition, a number of creative writers have also referred to an association with dreams. The following section first focuses on ten quotations with reincarnation as explanation. After three quotations with reincarnation and dreams as explanation, two quotations follow in which a link with organic factors is suggested. Lastly, two quotations are discussed that take unconscious memories to be the explanation.

## The *déjà vu* experience and reincarnation

In the psychiatric literature, a possible relation between the *déjà vu* experience and reincarnation has

been suggested by various authors, be it generally not seriously. However, parapsychologically orientated authors can be quite convinced that the *déjà vu* experience is based on memories of an earlier life.

In his account of a journey from Beirut to Jerusalem, the French author and politician Alphonse de Lamartine (1835) recounts how the sight of the landscape arouses a sensation similar to the *déjà vu* experience. In addition to reincarnation, he contemplates the "power of the premonition" as a possible explanation. This accords with Lalande's (1893) tentative hypothesis that the *déjà vu* experience is based on telepathy.

> "Excepté les vallées du Liban, les ruines de Balbek, les rives du Bosphore, à Constantinople, et le premier aspect de Damas, du haut de l'Anti-Liban, je n'ai presque jamais rencontré un lieu et une chose dont la première vue ne fût pour moi comme un souvenir! Avons-nous vécu deux fois ou mille fois? notre mémoire n'est-elle qu'une glace ternie que le souffle de Dieu ravive? ou bien avons-nous, dans notre imagination, la puissance de pressentir et de voir avant que nous voyions réellement? Questions insolubles!" (p. 316)[1]

Charles Dickens (1849) formulates a possible association with reincarnation in the following two accounts of the *déjà vu* experience in his novel *David Copperfield*:

> "We all have some experience of a feeling which comes over us occasionally, of what we are saying and doing having been said or done before, in a remote time – of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects and circumstances – of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remembered it." (p. 630)

David Copperfield has a similar experience earlier in the novel.

> "He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes; the room seemed full of the echoes of his voice; and the strange feeling (to which no one is quite a stranger) that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me." (p. 441)

In both of David Copperfield's *déjà vu* experiences, the recognition is accompanied by the feeling of being able to predict what is going to happen next (precognition). At the same time, he is unable to localise the exact moment of the original event. The second *déjà vu* experience is also accompanied by other dissociative symptoms such as micropsia and macropsia.

Charles Dickens's account of a journey through Italy (1846) reveals that he was able to draw from personal experience. Here again the possibility of reincarnation is suggested.

> "At sunset, when I was walking on alone, while the horses rested, I arrived upon a little scene, which by one of those singular mental operations of which we are all conscious, seemed perfectly familiar to me . . . If I had been murdered there, in some former life, I could not have seemed to remember the place more thoroughly, or with a more emphatic chilling of the blood." (p. 322)

In the poem *Sudden Light*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1854) depicts a *déjà vu* experience, referring to visual, olfactory and auditory perceptions. In addition, he indicates the concomitant inability to localise the previous experience, which could have led to the impression of familiarity. In the last verse, the poet wonders whether the recognition is related to reincarnation. The assumed pre-existence would seem to stem from the desire for the unending continuation of the infatuation.

> "I have been here before,
> But when or how I cannot tell:
> I know the grass beyond the door,
> The sweet keen smell,
> The sighing sound, the lights around the shore,
>
> You have been mine before, –
> How long ago I may not know:
> But just when at that swallow's soar
> Your neck turned so,
> Some veil did fall, – I knew it all of yore,
>
> Has this been thus before?
> And shall not thus time's eddying flight
> Still with our lives our love restore
> In death's despite,
> And day and night yield one delight once more?" (p. 295)

In *Ecstasy*, a novel by the Dutch author Louis Couperus (1892), the young widow Cecile van Even has a *déjà vu* experience she attributes to "some former existence ages agone". The *déjà vu* experience is accompanied by symptoms of depersonalisation. Again the impression of familiarity pertains to every detail, as if it were an exact copy of an earlier experience.

> "and a strange feeling of uncertainty seemed winding her about as with vague meshes; a feeling not new to her, in which she seemed no longer to possess herself, in which she did not know what she was thinking, nor

1. "With the exception of the valleys of the Lebanon Mountains, the ruins of Balbek, the shores of the Bosphorus at Constantinople and the first view of Damascus from the top of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, I virtually never come across any place or thing which upon seeing it for the first time, did not seem to me as if it were a memory! Have we lived twice or a thousand times? is our memory merely a muted mirror that God's breath animates again? or have we in our imagination the power of premonition and to be able to see before we actually observe? Unanswerable questions!"

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what at this very moment she might say. Something dropped into her brain, a momentary suggestion. Her head sank a little, and, without hearing distinctly, it seemed to her that once before she had heard this romance played so, exactly so, as Jules now played it, very, very long ago, in some former existence ages agone, in just the same circumstances, in this very circle of people, before this very fire; the tongues of the flame shot up with the same flickerings as from the logs of ages back, and Suzette blinked with the same expression she had worn then on that former . . ." (pp. 16–17)

The association between reincarnation and the *déjà vu* experience is a central feature in *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, a novel by P. D. Ouspensky (1900). Just as he is about to lose the woman he loves, Osokin has a *déjà vu* experience.

"'There are times when it seems to me that I remember something,' he says to himself slowly, 'and others when it seems that I've forgotten something very important. I feel as though all this had happened before in the past. But when? I don't know. How strange!'" (p. 11)

With the help of a magician, Osokin gets the opportunity to live his life again. In this way, he thinks he will be able to correct his mistakes. In the beginning, Osokin is aware that he is living his life again. Later the memories become weaker and the *déjà vu* experiences stronger. In the end, it appears that he is unable to change anything.

In *Catch-22*, a satirical novel by Joseph Heller (1955), the chaplain suddenly feels he recognises everything down to the very last detail and tries to predict the immediate future. Living in a constant religious crisis, the chaplain also contemplates reincarnation as a possible explanation for his *déjà vu* experience.

"For a few precarious seconds, the chaplain tingled with a weird, occult sensation of having experienced the identical situation before in some prior time or existence. He endeavored to trap and nourish the impression in order to predict, and perhaps even control, what incident would occur next, but the afflatus melted away unproductively, as he had known beforehand it would." (p. 219)

*Jechidah and Jachid*, a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer (1961), is a mystical and parapsychological version of a similar association between reincarnation and the *déjà vu* experience. Jechidah, an angel who is banned to earth, has a *déjà vu* experience when she first meets Jachid. Neither of them is aware of the fact that they have known each other as angels in heaven.

"Where have I seen him before? How is it that his voice sounds so familiar to me? Jechidah wondered. And how does it happen that he's called Jachid? Such a rare name.
After a while Jechidah said: 'I have a strange feeling I have experienced all this before.'
'Déjà vu – that's what psychology calls it.'
'But maybe there's some truth to it . . .'
'What do you mean?'
'Maybe we've known each other in some other world.'
Jachid burst out in laughing. 'In what world? There is only one, our, the earth'." (pp. 81–90)

In "*Déjà Vu*", a song by David Crosby (1970) on the album of the same name by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, reincarnation is also suggested as an explanation.

"If I had ever been here before
I would probably know just what to do, don't you
If I had ever been here before
On another time around the wheel,
I would prob'ly know just how to deal, with all of you.

For I feel like I been here before,
Feel like I been here before
And you know it makes me wonder, what's goin' on,
Oh, under the ground, um, do ya know,
Don't you wonder, what's goin' on down under you.

We have all been here before (4×)" (Reproduced with permission of International Music Publications)

### The *déjà vu* experience and reincarnation or dreams

In addition to reincarnation, creative writers have also associated the *déjà vu* experience with dreams. This association between dreams and *déjà vu* experiences has been suggested by psychiatric writers as well. In literary works, dreams are almost exclusively considered in combination with reincarnation, suggesting that dreams are viewed as manifestations of reincarnation. In *Guy Mannering*, a novel by Sir Walter Scott (1815), Brown, the main character, feels he recognises the environment. He contemplates dreams as well as reincarnation as possible explanations.

"Why is it that some scenes awaken thoughts which belong, as it were, to dreams of early and shadowy recollection, such as my old Bramin Moonshie would have ascribed to a state of previous existence? . . . How often do we find ourselves in society which we have never before met, and yet feel impressed with a mysterious and ill-defined consciousness, that neither the scene, the speakers, nor the subject are entirely new; nay, feel as if we could anticipate that part of the conversation which has not yet taken place!" (p. 359)

This fragment also illustrates the concomitant feeling of being able to predict what is about to happen the next moment (precognition).

In the poem *To – (As when with downcast eyes)*, Alfred Tennyson (1833) describes a *déjà vu* experience associated with daydreams. In addition to dreams, Tennyson also considers reincarnation as a possible explanation for the *déjà vu* experience.

> "As when with downcast eyes we muse and brood,
> And ebb into a former life, or seem
> To lapse far back in some confusèd dream
> To states of mystical similitude;
> If one but speaks or hems or stirs his chair,
> Ever the wonder waxeth more and more,
> So that we say, 'All this hath been before,
> All this hath been, I know not when or where.'
> So, friend, when first I looked upon your face,
> Our thought gave answer each to each, so true –
> Opposèd mirrors each reflecting each –
> That though I knew not in what time or place,
> Methought that I had often met with you,
> And either lived in either's heart and speech." (p. 459)

In "Where or When", a song from the musical *Babes in Arms* by Rodgers & Hart (1937), an association with both dreams and reincarnation is similarly suggested. The title "Where or When" refers to the inability to localise the original event in time or place.

> "When you're awake the things you think
> come from the dreams you dream.
> The thought has wings, and lots of things
> are seldom what they seem.
> Sometimes you think you've lived before
> all that you live today
> Things you do, come back to you
> as though they knew the way
> Oh, the tricks your mind can play!
>
> It seems we stood and talked like this before.
> We looked at each other in the same way then,
> but I can't remember where or when.
> The clothes you're wearing are the clothes you wore.
> The smile you are smiling you were smiling then,
> but I can't remember where or when.
>
> Some things that happen for the first time,
> seem to be happening again.
> And it seems that we have met before,
> and laughed before, and loved before,
> but who knows where or when!" (Reproduced with permission of International Music Publications)

## The *déjà vu* experience and organic factors

In psychiatric literature, a relation with organic factors has been noted by various authors. The organic factors that could be involved include temporal epilepsy, trauma capitis, cerebrovascular accidents and dementia. A *déjà vu* experience can also be related to emotional shock, exhaustion, or alcohol or drug use. Possible predisposing factors include fatigue, tension and illness. Joseph Heller formulates an explanation in terms similar to those of the neuropsychological interpretation noted by psychiatric writers.

> "Yossarian shook his head and explained that 'déjà vu' was just a momentary infinitesimal lag in the operation of two coactive sensory nerve centers that commonly functioned simultaniously."

The Dutch novelist J. Bernlef (1984) describes a *déjà vu* experience on the part of an elderly man with Alzheimer's disease in *Out of Mind*.

> "I pick up the book. Start reading. An echo rises from the sentences. As if I had seen this page before, as an image, in a flash. What do they call that feeling again, I read an article about it once. Déjà vu. A short-circuit between brain neurons. The image is registered a fraction of a second before the awareness of the image occurs, and so it seems you recognize something that you know for sure you can't have seen before." (p. 78)

The explanation described by Bernlef accords with the hypothesis formulated by Efron (1963) which is based on the results of neurophysiological research. According to Efron, a *déjà vu* experience emerges when the dominant hemisphere receives the same information twice in succession, once directly and once relayed after a momentary extra delay from the non-dominant hemisphere.

## The *déjà vu* experience and unconscious memories

In the psychiatric literature, various authors have suggested that the *déjà vu* experience can be based upon unconscious memories or fantasies. In *Oblomov*, a novel by Ivan Goncharov (1859), Oblomov has a *déjà vu* experience that is accompanied by the inability to remember the supposed original event. His wondering whether he is dreaming is indicative of the subjective inappropriateness of the *déjà vu* experience. As an explanation, Oblomov alludes to unconscious memories, by contemplating the possibility that he "has lived through it before and forgotten it".[2]

> "There are rare and brief and dream-like moments when a man seems to be living over again something he has been through before at a different time and place. Whether he dreams of what is going on before him

2. The Dutch version of Oblomov's *déjà vu* experience differs from the English one. In the former translation the dreaming of Oblomov is not related to the actual moment of experiencing but to dreams of the past which are considered as the origins of the *déjà vu* experience. In addition, in the Dutch version Oblomov doesn't contemplate events earlier in his life – indicating unconscious memories – but events in an earlier life – indicating reincarnation. An expert on Russian literature (Prof dr K. van het Reve) was consulted and informed us that the Dutch translation was closest to the original text of Goncharov.

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now, or has lived through it before and forgotten it, the fact remains that he sees the same people sitting beside him again as before and hears words that have already been uttered once: imagination is powerless to transport him there again and memory does not revive the past, and merely brings on a thoughtful mood." (p. 470)

The American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1863) recounts a *déjà vu* experience he has when visiting a mansion in England. He is initially at a loss as to how to explain it, but later concludes that it must have been based upon an unconscious memory of a letter from Alexander Pope that he read when he was a boy. In this letter, the very same mansion appears to have been described.

"while we stood gazing at this kitchen, I was haunted and perplexed by an idea, that, somewhere or other, I had seen this strange spectacle before. . . . my unaccountable memory of the scene was lighted up with an image of lurid fires, blazing all round the dim interior circuit of the tower. I had never before had so pertinacious an attack, as I could not but suppose it, of that odd state of mind wherein we fitfully and teazingly remember some previous scene or incident, of which the one now passing appears to be but the echo and reduplication." (p. 183)

### Implicit explanations

In addition to the explicitly formulated explanations, an explanation of a literary *déjà vu* experience can also be derived by interpretation on the part of the reader. Such an interpreted explanation can be based upon the context, supplementary information and psychoanalytical or clinical psychiatric considerations. We now examine ten literary descriptions in which, from a psychoanalytical point of view, an association with defence would seem plausible. Subsequently, we focus on five descriptions illustrating an association with organic factors on the grounds of clinical psychiatric considerations.

### The *déjà vu* experience and defence

In a psychoanalytic interpretation of a *déjà vu* experience, aesthetic, dramatic and sociocultural aspects should be taken into consideration. This method of interpretation is not necessarily reductionistic. On the contrary, by revealing a meaningful connection between otherwise incomprehensible or seemingly irrelevant details, it sometimes adds an extra dimension. A psychoanalytic interpretation of a novel or poem can also serve as an illustration of scientifically discovered insights (Baudry, 1984; Kaplan, 1988). This is not so surprising, as literary works constitute an aspect of the same cultural tradition psychiatry has flourished in. Side by side with science, history, culture, and morality play a role in the consultation room of the psychiatrist.

Several psychoanalytical authors have assumed an association between the *déjà vu* experience and defence. Some of these authors held that it serves as a defence mechanism; others asserted that the *déjà vu* experience is a consequence of a failure of defence.

Brown, the main character in the novel *Guy Mannering* by Sir Walter Scott (1815), has a *déjà vu* experience when he returns to the spot where he was abducted by bandits 17 years before at the age of five. He has complete amnesia as regards all the events preceding the abduction. For Brown, it must have been an extremely frightening experience. One plausible explanation is that the *déjà vu* experience is related to defence against reactivated anxiety and fears.

The *déjà vu* experiences of David Copperfield in the novel of the same name by Charles Dickens (1849) would seem to be related to defence against forbidden sexual feelings. He adores his foster sister Agnes Wickfield as the ideal woman, whereas erotic feelings are strikingly absent. It is not until after the death of his first wife Dora, a childlike woman who was not on his intellectual level, that he first realises how much he loves Agnes. When Mr Micawber, a grandiloquent acquaintance of David, praises Agnes's attractions, graces and virtue, David has one of his *déjà vu* experiences. The other one occurs when David's anger is aroused by the despicable clerk Uriah Heep, who informs him of his hope to marry Agnes one day.

The *déjà vu* experience of 16-year-old Nicolai Irtenyev in *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth* by Leo Tolstoy (1852) is comprehensively analysed by R. W. Pickford (1944). Pickford holds that the *déjà vu* experience is related to Nicolai's defence against his unconscious sexual fantasies concerning Varenka, the sister of his friend Dimitri Nechludov, whom he idolised.

"And all at once I experienced a strange sensation. I suddenly recollected that what was now happening to me was an exact repetition of what had happened once before; that then also light rain was falling, and the sun was setting behind the birches, and I was looking at her, and she was reading, and I had magnetized her, and she had glanced up, and I had even recollected that this had happened before." (p. 320)

In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy (1859) describes a *déjà vu* experience on the part of Natásha Rostóv, a 16-year-old girl yearning for the return of her fiancé

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Prince Andrew Bolkonski from abroad. Her yearning for Prince Andrew has put her "in a mood for brooding on the past".

> "Sónya passed to the pantry with a glass in her hand. Natásha glanced at her and at the crack in the pantry door, and it seemed to her that she remembered the light falling through that crack once before and Sónya passing with a glass in her hand. 'Yes, it was exactly the same,' thought Natásha. . . . 'There! That's just how she started and just how she came up smiling timidly when all this happened before', thought Natásha, 'and in just the same way I thought there was something lacking in her.'" (p. 145)

Natásha has this *déjà vu* experience in a period when she "has fits of depression she could not master". Ambivalent feelings menace her solemn vow to remain true to her love. The *déjà vu* experience seems to be associated with a defence against these feelings and takes her back to the time when her contentment was still complete.

Pickford (1940) makes it plausible that the *déjà vu* experience described in *Sudden Light*, by Rossetti (1854), is associated with a defence against an unconscious identification of the beloved future wife with the mother image. The veil is assumed to stand for the veil of repression and *Sudden Light* for the unanticipated insight into the emotional meaning.

Using biographical information, Zangwill (1944) presents a psychoanalytical explanation for the *déjà vu* experience described by Hawthorne (1863). In Pope's description, there appears to be a turret room where an adulterous woman was said to have once been confined. This is thought to have aroused Hawthorne's oedipal fantasies about his mother, who had confined herself to her room for years on end after the death of her husband when Hawthorne was about four years old. Zangwill argues quite convincingly that the *déjà vu* experience is associated with defence against reactivated incestuous fantasies. This would also explain the "lurid fires": Hawthorne was a puritan and in his work "hellfire" is a symbol of forbidden sexual desires and sinfulness.

In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* by Thomas Hardy (1873), Elfride Swancourt would also seem to have had a *déjà vu* experience associated with defence, particularly against fear and anxiety. She has a *déjà vu* experience just as deliberately reckless behaviour almost makes her fall off the parapet of a churchtower.

> "'You are familiar of course, as everybody is, with those strange sensations we sometimes have, that the moment has been in duplicate, or will be.'
> 'That we have lived through that moment before?'
> 'Or shall again. Well, I felt on the tower that something similar to that scene is again to be common to us both.'" (p. 179)

In addition to defence against anxiety, defence against forbidden feelings of infatuation would also seem to have played a role. The incident takes place while taking a walk with Henry Knight, the man she is secretly in love with. However, this love is futile since she has promised to be faithful to Stephen Smith, a childhood sweetheart. Elfride purposely walks along the parapet just to tease Knight. She trips, and fortunately falls on the "right side", accidentally landing in Knight's arms. The symbolic significance of falling is also of interest here. Elfride views herself as a "fallen woman" because of an escapade in the past with Stephen Smith. Her self-deprecation is reinforced by Knight's comment that "he must have untried lips".

The *déjà vu* experience described in *Ecstasy*, a novel by Couperus (1892), also seems to be associated with defence against forbidden erotic impulses. The young widow Cecile van Even has a *déjà vu* experience shortly after she is introduced to Taco Quaerts. This introduction is the start of a relationship centred around the conflict between spiritual and sensual love. As was the case with "the lurid fires" in the novel by Hawthorne (1863), here too fire might well have symbolised forbidden sexual desires.

Pickford (1944) makes a convincing case for the association with defence in the *déjà vu* experience described by Marcel Proust (1919) in *Remembrance of Things Past*. This *déjà vu* experience takes place shortly after the main character became casually acquainted with a village girl, and his unconscious sexual fantasies threaten to become conscious. The *déjà vu* experience is accompanied by derealisation symptoms and a pleasant sensation.

> "I had just seen, standing a little way back from the steep ridge over which we were passing, three trees, probably marking the entrance to a shady avenue, which made a pattern at which I was looking now not for the first time; I could not succeed in reconstructing the place from which they had been, as it were, detached, but I felt that it had been familiar to me once; so that my mind having wavered between some distant year and the present moment, Balbec and its surroundings began to dissolve and I asked myself whether the whole of this drive were not a make-believe, . . ." (p. 20)

An association with defence is also plausible for the *déjà vu* experience in the lyrics by David Crosby (1970) cited earlier. It seems as if the experience is an effort on the part of the insecure subject to reassure himself, by way of a reaffirmation of the reality of the present.

### The *déjà vu* experience and organic factors

As has been noted, various psychiatric authors have observed an association between the *déjà vu*

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experience and organic factors. Oblomov's *déjà vu* experience described by Ivan Goncharov (1859) is probably a consequence of a cerebrovascular accident that he had shortly beforehand. In *The Last Gentleman* by Walker Percy (1966), Will Barrett, an engineer, regularly has *déjà vu* experiences that are probably caused by temporal epilepsy.

> "As a child he had had 'spells' . . . , there came over him as it might come over a sorrowful old man the strongest sense that it all happened before and that something else was going to happen and when it did he would know the secret of his own life. . . . Sometimes he 'fell out' and would wake up hours later, in his bed, refreshed but still haunted." (pp. 10–11)

The explanation of the pathogenesis offered by Will Barret accords with the hypothesis of Oberndorf (1941) and Arlow (1959) that the *déjà vu* experience is based on a distortion of the sense of time.

> "When he got sick, his sense of time went out of kilter, did not quite coincide with the ongoing present moment, now falling behind, now speeding ahead: a circumstance that no doubt accounted for the rich harvest of déjà vus." (p. 66)

Biographical information would seem to indicate that the *déjà vu* experience described by David Crosby (1970) is also partly due to the influence of soft drugs (Crosby & Gottlieb, 1988). As regards the *déjà vu* experience described in the novel by Bernlef (1984), dementia is probably an aetiological factor.

*Déjà vu* experiences are not only in evidence in novels, poems and songs but in films as well. In *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Dworkin, 1985), Roberta Glass is running away from a man who is bothering her. She has a *déjà vu* experience after she has banged her head against a lamppost and lost consciousness. The heroine is fortunately rescued by Dez O'Herliby, her knight on a borrowed motorcycle.

> "'This is like a déjà vu,' she murmured.
> 'How can you have a déjà vu if you don't remember anything?' asked Dez. Now he sounded annoyed, and Roberta decided she did not like him as much as she had originally.
> 'I simply feel like I have seen all of this before!' she said sharply. 'But I have never seen you before, . . . !'" (pp. 83–84)

Roberta turned out to be suffering from total amnesia, which resulted in a hilarious succession of comedia dell' arte adventures and of course a "happy end".

## Discussion

In much the same way as in reality itself, *déjà vu* experiences occur in literary prose and poetry. In a number of descriptions, the ubiquitous occurrence of the phenomenon is explicitly emphasised. With the exception of the *déjà vu* experiences associated with organic psychosyndromes, the literary accounts pertain to young people. This accords with the clinical impression that *déjà vu* experiences are more frequent at a young age than later in life. The male preponderance (sex ratio = 1 : 4) in the literary descriptions reflects an over-representation of male authors rather than a gender-related predisposition to *déjà vu* experiences. Virtually all the *déjà vu* experiences in prose and poetry present the features viewed as characteristic in psychiatric literature: the impression of familiarity which pertains to the very smallest details and the inability to localise the reputed original event in time or place. The feeling of being able to predict what is about to occur (precognition) has occasionally been described as well. The experiences described by Dickens (1849), Couperus (1892) and Proust (1919) are accompanied by symptoms of depersonalisation. In psychiatric literature, the relation between depersonalisation and the *déjà vu* experience has been repeatedly noted. For example, Freud (1936) views the *déjà vu* experience as the positive pendant of depersonalisation.

In short, the literary accounts are consistent with the data obtained from psychiatric literature, including various phenomenological, aetiological and psychopathogenetic aspects of the *déjà vu* experience: art imitates life. This conclusion supports the view that psychiatrists, during and after their training, should be encouraged to overstep the limits of psychiatric literature and read literary prose and poetry as well.

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