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A CASE OF ART ABILITY FOLLOWING SIGHT RECOVERY IN SEVEN-YEAR-OLD CHILD BLIND FROM BIRTH

NORMAN C. MEIER

This study reports an investigation of a case of art ability in a child blind from birth until two months before the first picture was produced last December. The defective vision was caused by congenitally imperfect visual apparatus including nystagmus and complete double cataract. The latter was subjected to a series of operations mostly of the needling type with the expectation that the fluids would clear up the cataract substance. Not finding any reaction of this type developing, the surgeon resorted to the expedient of removing both natural lenses, thereby giving the subject a fair degree of vision through the aid of two sets of special cataract glasses, one for ordinary vision and one for reading. The nystagmus still persists without observable improvement.

When studied, the child had been in a country school for about four months, half of this time while blind, being aided in his work by an older sister. He is still unable to read ordinary type and learns certain subjects by aid of large-type books loaned by the Missouri State Commission for the Blind. His outdoor glasses permit him a certain range of activity: he is able to run, play most outdoor games, and walk with ease. Many of his former habits of touch in aiding prehension and manipulation of objects still persist, as well as a characteristic "feeling" step while walking. He was reported by the teacher as being able to do third grade arithmetic successfully and second and first year work in other studies.

On being tested for intelligence by two tests, one for the blind and one for normal subjects, he showed superior intelligence on both tests. An investigation of the home suggested that the advanced proficiency in arithmetic was a result of his earlier dependence upon audition. While older children were going through arithmetic drills at home, the subject had listened and had learned number combinations in that way. Even now he exhibits an astounding ability to participate in a conversation in another part of the room while busily engaged in another activity. An excep-

tionally retentive memory and highly trained habits of attention together with superior intelligence furthered by an eager attitude toward learning probably explained his accelerated progress in school subjects.

The home environment provided little explanation for his artistic ability. A family of seven, two adults and five children ranging in age from seven to fourteen, live in a one-room log cabin in the middle of a clearing half a mile from a road and fourteen miles from any town of consequence. It is more or less isolated in an oak woods. There are no books save the Bible, no magazines or newspapers in the home and little furniture. The other buildings are of a simple type and the farm is meagerly stocked with several cows, several horses, and two goats. Although the subject has been to Springfield for medical attention it was only during the final trip that he was able to see his surroundings and only on that occasion, two months prior to this study, that he saw his first movie, motor cars, busses, houses and other objects.

Tests were given for aesthetic sensitivity and picture analysis. These showed him to be greatly deficient in his contacts with even the common objects of life. He failed to recognize the symbols for such things as *broom*, *bridge* or *boat*. His perceptual background is therefore extremely fragmentary. Yet in spite of these limitations and experiential deficiencies he was able to draw and paint in a manner equal to that of normal children of his age and in some instances secure very striking depictions of animals or country scenes. His interest in color is marked and his drawing skill above average for his age. The sources of some of his productions were investigated, leading to the finding that he had rearranged the natural setting in the interest of attaining a better and more effective composition. In some aspects such as in tests for recognition memory and apperception the investigators—the writer, Dr. C. Tiebout and Mr. A. W. Saunders—were balked by the inability of the child to see the test materials clearly enough.

Two explanations of this apparent artistic ability resting upon only four months of visual contact with the world suggest themselves. One is that his view through his newly discovered sense of sight provides him with fresh and vivid impressions which through his superior intelligence he is able to express on paper in a normal or even superior manner. This would probably account for the fact that his compositions include in some instances farm scenes viewed days previous to the drawing. The other explanation is

that there is some kind of morphological inheritance of stock which lends itself readily to the easy acquisition of motor skills, not postulating any direct inheritance but merely that of a constitutional nature. Inquiry into his ancestry discloses remote progenitors who were engaged in activity utilizing some of the finer motor skills. Another side of the ancestry leads to Indian stock. Perhaps the two explanations together would tend to explain the case were the complete facts discoverable.

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