

# *All About Me*

**JESS OPPENHEIMER, Writer, Director, Producer**

Reprinted by the Optometric Extension Program Foundation, Inc.  
with permission from the JOURNAL OF LEARNING DISABILITIES,  
Volume 5, Number 7, August-September, 1972.

#### EDITORIAL COMMENT

The "man, Dr. Howard Walton of Culver City" (California), whom Jess Oppenheimer "finally came across," is an optometrist. He helped Jess Oppenheimer solve his visual problem. Their meeting early in 1955 is related on page 10.

In addition to the vertical prism prescribed in the glasses, Dr. Walton provided him optometric visual training for a year. The purpose was to eliminate his ocular-motor deficiencies.

"...I could not look at one spot for more than a split second without shifting away and back again ad nauseum..."

The optometric training (therapy) consisted of improving his ability to quickly and accurately align each eye alone and maintain fixation on a stationary or slowly moving target. The eye muscles were not faulty or weak; he hadn't learned to control them. When this ability was adequate he then learned to point and move the two eyes together, fixating and maintaining alignment with both eyes at the same place in space, whether on a stationary or moving object. This allowed him to learn to fuse the two eyes, i.e., mentally superimpose the visual images into a single percept.

As the visual abilities improved and the eyes worked together, the two sides of the body began to work together, eyes guiding, directing and controlling his other movements.

Thus, through vision development Jess Oppenheimer learned to see and enjoy life to its fullest while bringing laughter and joy to others.

Homer Hendrickson, O.D., D.O.S.  
Associate Director  
Optometric Extension Program

All during my life I knew I had a problem; I just didn't know what the problem was. In 1942, at the age of twenty-nine, I discovered it was connected with my eyes. I was at the Coast Guard Patrol Base in Wilmington, California, and had been given what was, to me at least, a detestable assignment. I had to collate 100 pages of material. I was given 1,000 page ones, 1,000 page twos, etc., and had to arrange them into 1,000 scripts running from page one to page one hundred. I delayed starting this as I knew it would make me sick. I knew I would have to do a few pages and rest till my nausea went away, then do a few more pages and rest, etc. I went into the mess hall to take advantage of the long tables and, walking along with a stack of page ones in my hand, I placed them one at a time on the table. Within five minutes I was so sick I had to stop. While I was resting, a thought occurred to me. The trouble seemed to come when I took a page from the stack and followed it to the table with my eyes. There was a great confusion, with the room spinning by. I wondered whether, if I placed one page down and then kept my eye on it lying still on the table, and picked up the next sheet and put it in place without looking away from the sheet on the table, it might be more comfortable. It was. The job took a long time, but I did not get sick again. I decided I had a problem with my eyes.

The following morning, while shaving, I decided to ask the man standing next to me about his vision. I was prompted to do this as he was an acrobat, and I figured he must have excellent eyes. Pointing to a sign on the wall across the room, I asked him to turn away from it, then suddenly turn and look at it. He did.

"How long did it take the signs to come together?" I asked. He gave me a look I won't forget.

"There's only one sign."

"I know there's really only one," I assured him, "but when you turn quickly like that, and they separate, how long does it take them to come together? It takes a couple of seconds with me."

He managed to convince me that he only saw one sign at any time and under any conditions, and this was shocking news to me — a supposedly intelligent, grown man. I was delighted that I had found a defect like this in myself, assuming that it could be corrected, but how could I have missed it all these years? How is it possible that I never suspected, never complained, never spoke of it before? The answer, I guess, is that we tend to feel that all people see and feel things the way we do. At least, having nothing to compare it with, I assumed my vision was normal.

I began to think back now to all the clues which should have sounded warning bells. There were millions of them. I thought of the many nights, while writing radio comedy, that I had worked until five or six in the morning and then driven home on the winding road to my house in the Hollywood Hills. I literally had to hold my hand over my left eye as I drove up the hill because the eye hurt so much. I always thought I was simply overtired. After all, as soon as I had a good night's sleep, it didn't hurt any more.

#### "THE ROOM SPUN"

I remembered my early childhood and how some of these symptoms which I didn't recognize led to personality and character traits. On the evenings when the housekeeper

was off, my sister and I were expected to dry the dishes. When I held a dish in one hand and watched it as I wiped with a rotary motion, the whole room spun and shifted in a confusing, then dizzying, then sickening manner. I was physically ill, and I showed it. My mother asked me if I was sick; I said yes and she told me to lie down for awhile. A few minutes later my sister realized that she was doing the dishes by herself. She sent my mother in to see if I was still ill. Of course, by this time I was feeling quite well, and the first few times she came in to check, I told her so. This resulted in my being marched back to the kitchen to dry more dishes and get sick again. I soon learned that the thing to do was to tell my mother I was still sick, even though I wasn't. It was much more comfortable that way, even though my sister branded me a malingerer.

I thought of my early attempts to teach myself to play the piano. I had great difficulty, in fact I found it impossible, without counting the keys, to locate middle "C." When I looked from one part of the keyboard to another, the entire keyboard shifted laterally in the opposite direction from my eye movement, and in a very confused manner. Then, when they came to a stop, one keyboard stopped while the other one slowly came into place. That is, almost into place. Just as it came up to make both keyboards one, I had to look away again. My weak eye, I now know, couldn't quite line up with the other. Thus, I had to keep shifting my gaze to avoid the pain the weak muscle gave me when I tried to look at one spot. I suddenly understood why I had never been able to look anyone in the eye, a fact which always bothered me. When I was talking to someone, my eyes would be darting around the room,

stopping for a moment, but only for a moment, for that is all the eye muscles would allow without becoming quite painful and causing tears to flow, on the person's eyes, then off around the landscape again. I was painfully conscious that I was not looking at him, and that he probably thought I was shifty-eyed (which I was) and most likely dishonest. This separation of one part of my attention to myself while the other was carrying on a conversation often resulted in a mental block. I would be split between the two parts and unable to function in either. At the same time I would be acutely embarrassed by my seeming stupidity.

I spent more than a few minutes reflecting on the irony of my mother's sole test for honesty, "Look me in the eye and tell me that." I either could not look her in the eye, or, if I forced myself to, the tears would stream down my cheeks and she would take that as an admission of guilt. I think I can safely say I hold the record for receiving unearned punishment. Especially because other children soon caught on to the fact that I was unable to appear anything but guilty, and they gleefully blamed all their misdeeds on me.

#### "I SAW TWO BALLS COMING AT ME"

I recalled my early attempts to play baseball. When a hit came to me in the field (I never could play the infield – and they let me play the outfield only when no other player could be located), I saw two balls coming at me. Today I make jokes about this, saying I had four hands and two gloves so I caught both of them! But that is not the truth. In the first place, I could not follow the ball as it approached me. I started from the bat, and became two, and at this point I had to look

away. However, I developed a fine capacity to judge the trajectory so I could go to the place where it would land. Perhaps I took another instantaneous glance or two as it was on its way. In any event, when it came down I was right there – and usually missed it!

My mind leaped back to the present, and I realized my eyes were responsible for the terrible difficulty I had in telling whether an officer was a commander, lieutenant commander, or captain. The gold stripes on their sleeves ran together and moved in relation to each other, so counting them was an impossibility.

Jumping back to the schoolyard, I recalled my early attempts to ride a bicycle. I was able, after a long period of trying, to ride all right as long as I was moving in a straight line and traveling rather fast. Curves were a big problem. I was never able to master one little maneuver which all the other fellows handled with consummate ease. This was to ride a bike between the uprights of a basketball backboard. These uprights were almost four feet apart, but nine times out of ten I ran into them instead of going through. In a much more complex and confused manner than can possibly be told, there were four uprights instead of two, which made three possible passageways and I had no ability to choose the right one, since they constantly moved in relation to each other.

#### “A MOMENT OF ANGER AT MY PARENTS”

I had a moment of anger at my parents. Why had they let me grow up like this? Why hadn't they done something about it? But almost immediately I knew that they had tried to do something about it. I had been to many doctors – eye doctors and general doctors and internists – because of getting nauseated so easily. Invariably, following an examination,

they patted my head and said I was a good strong boy with nothing organic the matter with me and that I should play in the sun and not worry so much. Even at the eye doctor, I do not remember taking any fusion tests; one of my eyes was 20/20 and the other 20/10, and it is my opinion that they weren't as conscious of fusion then as they are today.

A sudden thought burst on my mind. I had looked through stereopticons in the old days. They fascinated me. I had even talked about the remarkable effect they had with people who were viewing at the same time. Stereopticons had a definite effect for me. Somehow the prisms must have given me some small measure of stereopsis. But I only spoke to my fellow viewers in generalities: how wonderful they make things look; isn't that an interesting effect, or landscape? It was semantics. The other people were thinking (oh, why didn't they say it? I might have caught on!) that the stereopticon was wonderful because it made things look just like life, while my interest came from the fact that it made things look weird, unnatural, and most unlikelike.

That morning I went to the infirmary at the Coast Guard base. They had no facilities for treating my vision problems, but they gave me permission to see a civilian doctor. I went that afternoon. The doctor checked my eyes and told me I had an extreme horizontal muscle imbalance. (This is interesting to me because there never was a cosmetic problem. To the observer, my eyes were not out of line.) He also told me that I had never seen third dimension. I gave him a terrific argument at the time, but of course he was right. I based my argument on the fact that I could pass tests such as the Boy Scouts give for judgment of distance, etc. I now know that, although I could get results roughly even with the average normal boy, I did it by an entire set of judgments which had nothing to do with depth perception. Had the target been isolated in space, I would have had no way to even approach a guess. He gave me a set of exercises and told me to do them religiously, at the same time categorically stating that I

wouldn't, that no patient in his experience had ever kept them up long enough and relentlessly enough to achieve a real cure. In his experience a slight improvement resulted in so much more comfort that the patient figured he was normal and discontinued the exercises. He also explained a little of the physiology involved and told me that had my brain used one of the more usual methods of coping with the situation; that is, if it had crossed one eye, or suppressed the vision in one eye, or alternated the vision from eye to eye, then I would have been comfortable in a world without third dimension and might never have known I had a problem. But my brain accepted both these highly acute images and tried to deal with them and couldn't. Everything I looked at had a "ghost" image which was only slightly less clear, or I should say less strong or bright, than the real one; and each time my eyes moved the two images separated and then came together again.

That very morning I began orthoptic exercises. I am still doing them today, 21 years later. And my eyes are still improving. I begin to see what he meant by saying I wouldn't keep it up. After crossing a thousand exciting horizons, each of which I thought must be the ultimate, I realize there are many more ahead.

Little by little my eyes improved. I was able to get superposition while stationary, then while moving, then stereopsis while stationary, and then while moving, although not in a locked-in sense. It came and went, and when a conscious effort to hold it was not made, I reverted to my old muscle habits. When I first experienced stereopsis in a machine – it was a wire circle which suddenly became a sphere – a most distinct memory flashed into my mind: When I was in college at Stanford, a group of us drove to Los Angeles for the USC football game. We spelled each other on the driving. Please don't ask how I was able to drive – again, I used a different set of judgments and was very, very careful – the fact remains that I

took my turn at the wheel. At about four in the morning a very frightening thing happened to me. I was driving along with everything seeming normal, to me, when in an instant everything before me changed. I can now tell you what it looked like in terms you can understand; I could not have then. The whole vista suddenly took on a strange aspect. It was on one plane horizontally as far as I would see. The road was flat and stretched out and into the distance before me; the trees suddenly rose on both sides, standing in space; the hood of the care took on a shape and stood up from the road. I could see all these things at once, and it was a most terrifying and weirdly uncomfortable feeling. It was like a fairy wonderland where everything appears unreal. I didn't like it at all and had to shake my head roughly several times before I went back to what (to me, then) was natural. I said nothing of it to anyone, fearing, I must admit, that I might be losing my mind.

#### "I THOUGHT ALL WOMEN WERE FLAT"

In days to come I was to learn, however, slowly, that the space in the world consists of planes and corners; and people and things actually stand out vertically and have contours. I'm certain my wife never wants to hear me say again that I thought all women were flat until I got stereopsis, and then I married the first one I saw.

I can merely try to explain what seeing was like in my worst days. Describing the whole world as moving, or seeing double, is meaningless; because without the inner feelings of confusion, lack of equilibrium, nausea, strain and incompetence, a normal person can no more begin to sense it, even intellectually, than a congenitally blind person can begin to understand what the color red is. How would

you ever begin explaining it? You don't even speak the same language. Could you make a congenitally deaf person really know what music is by describing it to her in sign language? A person who has normal equilibrium and fusion can be quite comfortable in a world of diplopia. Give them glasses which makes everything seem double and I think they could adjust quite well. If the world is spinning by, they can also handle it, as witness merry-go-rounds, etc. This confusion has to happen inside, with mental impressions all disoriented. The way I saw things was something like two still pictures out of register with each other, with this lack of register continually changing. But superimposed on this was the lack of ability to really tell where up and down really were and whether you were going to fall over the next minute or not, to say nothing of the constant dizziness and easy nausea. Perhaps a normally sighted person could get some idea if he were to hold one half of a binocular in each hand with no connection between them and each eyepiece blocking out all other light. In addition, these binocular halves would have a built-in offset, or parallax, which set the points of view so far apart that the brain couldn't fuse them, even of each hand in relation to the other. With the brain blocked out from locking the two together, and with the point of view when looking at an object giving a false impression of the position of the viewer's body, there may be an approximation of the way I saw, but even then I think a solid equilibrium and body image could enable him to feel relatively comfortable in spite of this.

As I worked longer and longer on my orthoptics, the world began to stand still more and more. My attention span grew longer. My brain was no longer so kaleidoscopic (I practically had had to say, in dealing with an

idea, "I'll think some more about that one the next time it comes around.") As I progressed through superposition, almost always to stereopsis sometimes, a calmness inside was apparent; and I started to be able to do something I had never been able to do before – to gaze at something – to look at one spot and keep my eyes looking at that spot in a relaxed manner. The beginnings of this were quite thrilling, and I'm getting better and better all the time, reveling in the thrill of looking people in the eye. A rather remarkable development took place as my world of space began to take form with relation to sight; a similar effect became apparent in sound. I was becoming stereophonic also, and in the same relationship as with sight.

Before the improvement began, I could not tell where a sound was coming from. I could not carry a tune, and I could not listen to music. I could hear it, but it did not become music to me. I will explain this later. For now, the important thing is that, to a great degree, sounds began to have a position in space, instead of happening at my ear. That's right, happening *at my ear*. When I heard a sound – bugle, for example, I would hear it right at my ear, as though the sound was happening in my eardrum. If it was a sharp or very loud sound, I would hear it as though the eardrum was an overloaded speaker, with a harsh edge of distortion to the sound that was physically painful. In any event, it would have no position in space. I knew it came from my right side because it was loud in my right ear. I would then identify the sound and look for it, but my senses did not tell me where it was in space. Similarly, if it came from my left side, I would hear it in my left ear. If there were two sounds at the same time, I would hear one with one ear and the second with the other ear, but I did not fuse them, just as I did not fuse the vision of the two eyes, but tried to keep track of them independently – with dire results. I could feel a

shifting from one ear to the other. I remember, not too long ago, sitting from great lengths of time, listening to a clock. The tick came from one side, heard by one ear, and the tock from the other, heard by the other ear. More correctly, the sound came from no place in particular and I heard a tick in my right ear and a tock in my left. After lengthy trying, I could get them to fuse so that they were not heard in my ears at all, but inside my head, and they then suddenly had a position in space, as did the whole room or whatever I was looking at. I used this same system, unfortunately, in listening to music. One ear, for instance, hearing the singer and the other the accompaniment; or in the case of the duet, one ear listened to the baritone and the other to the soprano. In the case of an orchestra, one ear listened to one part of the orchestration and the other to another part. The main concern is that in no case did they fuse into one percept inside my head, so I did not hear harmony. What I was not listening to was there, but sort of ignored as it had no relationship with the part I singled out, much the same as the ghost image in sight. As the vision improved, or I should say, as the mental ability to handle the images from the two eyes improved due to the lessening of muscle imbalance, so exactly did this aural condition improve, and voices started coming from people's heads and from loudspeakers, rather than having a separate existence (even though I could tell, of course, from where they came).

## TWO HALVES OF ONE PERSON

You should be getting the feeling by now that I felt (again, I did not think of it in these terms, as I could not analyze it until I knew what normal, or near normal, was) like two people, or rather, like two halves of one person (each half with a separate control) which were trying to work as a whole. How then could these two halves work together? Well, as far as I can see,

one becomes the leading half and one becomes the following half. But even the leading half can't depend on its equilibrium, so it has to depend upon vision to help it. It leans upon vision by really locking onto what it sees. I say "locking" because, without equilibrium, it can't gaze at one spot while things move across past it. It locks on in the same manner one would hold onto a doorknob to steady oneself. If the door is opened, your hand would move with the knob. It follows, then, that your eye must move with the spot you are locked onto. I recall many times sitting in a motion picture theater and watching a shot of a car approaching and crossing the screen from left to right. I invariably found myself looking at the right wall of the theater and had to go back and find the screen again. More painfully, in trying to fight when I was young — and you can imagine I was very bad at it — I would watch the other boy's fists. God help me if he swung and missed, for as his fist went by, my head turned with it, and I soon felt his other one. While watching television I would have the same experience, suddenly finding myself looking at the side wall of the room if something went across the screen fast. The same thing happened when any moving object entered the field from the outside; my eye was irresistibly drawn to it. It caught my eye, a phrase, incidentally, which I consider to be a great truism. This same locking-on happened in sound; any new sound demanded that the ear fix on it, with the result that, in listening to music for instance, an obbligato would be heard and my ear would now listen to it and be led to C above high C or down into the depths of the double bass, solidly fixed on something that had nothing to do with the main number — and listening to the obbligato to the exclusion of everything else.



Is it not possible that a more direct analogy exists between the ears and the eyes than is normally thought of? For instance, we have a little understood ability to concentrate on one sound while blocking out others, as is evidenced by the fact that we can listen to one person speaking in a noisy room filled with other conversations, or pick out and listen to one instrument in an orchestration. If it is possible for one to grow up without the ear fusing, isn't it possible for each ear to focus on a different part of the entire sound picture; thereby presenting the same kind of confused aural picture to the brain that the eyes do when they are in imbalance and confuse the brain because each is looking at a different picture?

#### "I" EXISTED COMPLETELY APART FROM MY BODY

I often use a descriptive term which I call "point of consciousness." It is very delicate to try and describe what I mean. We all (I think) have a place, or a point, inside of us which is really the location of our conscious mind. This is the spot you refer to when you say, "I said to myself." I call it the "point of consciousness." My "point of consciousness" was always outside of and differentiated from me. I have great respect for the person who first said of someone, "He is out of his head." That fellow knew what he was talking about. I can tell pretty well now, from reading and feeling, that what I really meant was that I had no body image. "I" existed completely apart from my body. The two were not locked together any more than the sound of a voice was locked into emanating from the speaking person's head. My "point of consciousness" wandered. It had a bad habit of standing away and looking at me, but since it was the essence of me, I was both with my body and apart from it, looking at myself, or judging my actions, or telling myself what a fool I was making of myself.

As my stereo senses developed, I began to get some new sensations. I found, for instance, that I could sense the roundness of my head.

This was nothing in itself, but I discovered, and I don't know how, that when I was trying to listen to music or see something correctly, if I concentrated on the dimensions of my head, made that the primary impression (and of the roundness, completely, so that both sides were involved) and the music or the seeing was secondary, that the music sounded right and the seeing was stereoptical and of a single percept. As soon as I saw the scene perfectly, or heard the music perfectly, I tried to concentrate on it and immediately lost the integration. I had to learn to listen "away" from the music in order to hear it correctly, to look "away" from the scene if I wanted to see it correctly. I think, of course, that what was happening was that the eye muscles pulled the poor eye into a position where it was lined up correctly, and in this position the information from the muscles and the equilibrium centers could fuse and give me an impression of body image. When I went to look directly at the object in question, I reverted to my old eye habits and threw one eye out while I fixed on the object with the other one. I had to learn to look while I had the feeling of head image, even though the impression I got was that I was looking away or to one side of it. The same thing with sound. Of interest is something I have realized only recently: With my old eye habits I was really conscious of only one small spot I was looking at. The rest of the field really didn't exist for me. It was there and it would confuse things, but to a great extent I was able to tune it out. When I see correctly, however, the stereopsis, the entire field exists as a single percept. Everything forward of a plane opposite to the direction I am facing and even with my eyes, exists simultaneously in space. Although I am looking only at a small spot directly, everything else is there and in relation.

It amuses me that for a number of years now I have been able to pass all the tests which the optometrists and ophthalmologists give for fusion. More than one doctor has said to me that my eyes are fine and any problems I have must be psychogenic. I finally came across a man, Dr. Howard Walton of Culver City, who said to me, "If you came in off the street and I tested your eyes, I would have to shake your hand and tell you they are in excellent shape. However, since you tell me you have problems, if you want to spend the time and money, I will sit and listen to your subjective reactions and try to relate them to some corrective program." He listened and tested again and again for some time and one day said, "The only problem I can find is a small vertical imbalance. This only amounts to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one diopter, and you should easily be able to overcome three diopters. However, if you want to try it, we can give you glasses and put a prism in front of your eye which will allow the eye to assume its position of rest and still look where the other one does." I decided to try it, and within a day after starting to wear glasses the world began to stand still for me! It was the beginning of integration which is continuing to this day. Evidently I had gone as far as I could with overcoming horizontal imbalance, and even when that was completely cured, the vertical prevailed. Interestingly, the basic vertical imbalance was much more than showed up. The correction, tested each year, has progressed from  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one diopter to one diopter, to one and a quarter, and finally now, one and a half.

It seems obvious to me that a person can have eyes which are fine for all testing situations, but some subtleties of cooperation and integration between the eyes or different portions of the eyes can cause them problems, and there are no tests for detecting them. For instance, in making a pursuit movement, I get a very definite, distracting, and uncomfortable sensation that the background is going in the opposite direction to the object I am pursuing, and at the same relative speed. In the first

place, now that I have been able to see things normally in a pursuit situation, I know that this condition gives the impression of infinitely more movement, or speed, than normal. To my judgment, what is happening is that the two eyes are out of alignment, so that the images fall on disparate points on the retina. But I can see the object which I am pursuing with great clarity. I think that I suppress the foveal area of one eye so that the foveal area of the other eye sees the subject singly, but the peripheral fields of the two eyes are still out of register. Since the eyes are not close enough to fuse, I get an impression, of a sort of double background moving in the opposite direction. When I see correctly in a pursuit situation I am not aware of the background, although the point of view changing horizontally must mean that the backgrounds are moving across the retinas in a direct opposite to the pursuit. When I can fuse them it is neither uncomfortable nor distracting.

There is a slightly disturbing factor to the new, normal vision. I mean seeing with the Cyclopean Eye — being conscious of only one visual percept, with a field which covers  $180^\circ$ . It is the fact that I definitely saw *more* the abnormal way. I hope I can explain this. Seeing correctly, I am fixed on one spot. Let us say that I am driving and waiting at a stop light. I am watching the light across the intersection. Cars are crossing the intersection, and people are crossing directly in front of my car. I am aware of all of these things happening simultaneously in space, although for the life of me I could not tell you what the people looked like or what the drivers of the cars crossing the intersection looked like. The whole scene is in proper form, and I am only acutely aware of whether the light is green or red. Now before,

with the inability to gaze for more than a second at anything, and the fixing with one eye, really, I would actually take a very good look at each person crossing the street in front of me, practically every car which passed, and a few signs on the buildings, etc. My eyes would be darting from one spot to another, and I would be getting acute impressions of these things.

Let me try another way to describe the "latching on" which my eye did, the "attaching" itself to what I looked at. It defies words, but perhaps I can communicate some of it. Picture it in terms of a person who is standing in a well about four feet across. This person has very poor equilibrium and, if he does not lean on something, he will fall over. One hand, however, is unusable. It is strapped to his side. This is analogous to my weak eye. Now this person is leaning against the wall of the well with his good hand, and he wants to turn around facing the opposite direction. As he turns, since he has no equilibrium, he must take his hand from the wall and quickly put it a foot further along the wall, leaning again. He must continue this process, taking his hand off the wall and moving it forward and leaning on another spot, until he is where he wishes to be. And even when he gets to the desired position, he must continue leaning on the wall or he will fall over. In a sense, he is "attached" to the wall, since he has to maintain constant contact with it. If he had normal balance, he would have been independent of the wall and simply turned — and when he reached the desired position, he would have no contact with the wall at all. This kind of thing is what happened to me visually. Since there was no space to keep what I was looking at separate and apart from me, my eye acted like the arm and reached out to "lean" on the spot it was looking at. If what it is leaning on was moving, the eye had to try

and move with it, just as the man would have had to move with the wall, if it were moving. I hope this makes some measure of sense. Writing subjectively about sensations your reader has never experienced is somewhat like performing a brilliant satire on a literary piece to an audience which does not know the original. They simply cannot appreciate it.

Although one eye was weak and the other strong, I sometimes used them independently. One of the most graphic independent uses was again in driving. As I drove along and came to an intersection, I would look one way and then the other to see if it was safe to go on through. Now instead of both eyes looking to the left and then both swinging around and looking to the right, I would look to the left and only see with the left eye, then to the right and only see with the right eye. In each case the other eye was there in the sense that it was not completely suppressed. I was conscious of it, but it did not come all the way over to look at the same spot, and the basic picture came from the eye with which I was looking. If both eyes had looked in one direction and then swung over and both seen in the opposite direction, the two views would have had a relation to each other. In my case, however, there was no relation. I had two views independently. This wasn't too bad if there was no one coming in either direction. It was panic if there was someone coming from both directions, as I could not relate them as to speed and direction in relation to my speed and direction. For instance, I could not instinctively sense that, if I slowed down a bit and let the one coming from the left get past me, there would be time for me to go through without colliding with the one coming from the right. There was simply a confusion in which I knew there were two cars coming, and from different directions, and I could't make any judgment about them. I had to stop, let both cars go by and then proceed. With the normal vision there is no problem at all. I am aware of two objects approaching from different directions at different speeds which I

can judge accurately without even looking directly at them. I look at each (the sensation is that the field with both cars in stays stationary and my point of view changes, so that they are always in relationship) and blithely drive through.

### SCHOOLWORK

This lack of relationship between different parts of what should be seen in a visual field was very apparent in my school work and in art appreciation. In studying maps, for instance, I was never able to get a good relationship of the positions of the various states or countries. Since I was unable to see a group of states at one time with any clarity, I never knew the pattern; just as composition in pictures escaped me because I never saw the whole picture clearly at one time. In the case of maps, if I was studying Texas and Oklahoma, my impression would be formed from a succession of individual looks which never put together into a whole. Thus, I would be able to tell you that Texas came to a point at the bottom, or that it had a little offset at the top, and that Oklahoma was at that offset; but I never mentally or physically saw these two together, fitting into each other in one comprehensive or composite impression. While writing this, some other examples come to mind. In watching a chorus line on the stage, or a ballet, I would always single out one person to watch, never getting the picture of what the group was doing.

A fascinating study for another time would be to try and test the particular integration of

eyes and ears as they relate to various talents and types of personality. At different times, depending on whether I am seeing well or not, and to what degree, my personality goes through changes. I find that when everything is working quite well I feel a tremendous surge of vitality. It is easy to move, as contrasted with it being a very considerable effort to move when things are not right. It is not only easy to speak, or sing, but I have the ability to control my voice, make it do whatever I think — accents, etc., are simple, true and effortless. I feel this must be what the talented actor or entertainer must feel like. There is boundless energy. At other times, when things are not so good, I feel the opposite — retiring, quite — a listener. It is a great effort to move, or to speak for any length of time.

### A WORD FOR CHILDREN WHO SUFFER

I would like to say a word here for children who suffer because they do not do physical things as quickly and eagerly as their parents would like. I speak of the order of such things as manners — opening a door, standing when someone enters the room, etc., especially when these children are constantly compared with others who execute these maneuvers promptly. I have been both kinds of individual. Let me give you an example. I do setting up exercises in the morning. One of them is sit-ups. I do 30 sit-ups, and until very recently it was a major effort for me to do them. They were all uncomfortable, but toward the last my right side back muscles would pain and practically go into a spasm, so that when I finished the last one, I would have to grab my knees with my arms to take the strain off the muscles. Lately, my left side had come to life. It is connected with the whole utilization of my left eye, equilibrium centers, etc. Many things

have changed. I can eat and chew gum on the left side of my jaw. I never could keep anything there for more than one or two chews before. It would always, involuntarily, work its way back to the right. I can use my left hand in many ways I would not even think of trying before. The other morning I was pounding some stakes into the ground and found that when my right arm got tired I switched over to using my left hand, and with very satisfactory results. I couldn't believe it. The fact is that my entire left side is coming to life and, as such, performs a function that it never did before. I am conscious of it; I use it; it acts as a balance and control for my right side with which I had always had problems in limiting a movement, such as drawing a line and stopping at a given point. At any rate, with my new left side working along with my old right side, the sit-ups became a pleasure. There was no effort. At the end of the thirty I was as fresh as at the beginning. There was no muscle spasm, no pain, no grabbing of the knees. Instead of lifting a ton up and down, I felt as though I were lifting a feather. There have been many times when I have had this feeling in different situations. One of them is in the case of standing when a lady enters the room. You may call the inability to do this childish, rude, boorish or disrespectful. The fact remains that, when I am in one piece, it is a pleasure. I leap to my feet and rejoice in the ease of movement. I dash around to the other side of the car and open the door for any lady within a block. I answer briskly and with clear, exquisite diction when spoken to, being incapable of my usual mumble. How can I explain that these same moves were a tremendous effort in the same situation the

night before or the week before? Can I get across to anyone that it was as though the space was the same as swimming upstream? No one would expect me to stand when a lady entered the room if I had a hundred pound weight on my shoulders. Since most people, I imagine, go through life integrated in one unchanging way, they can never know — and no one can make them understand — how the forces within someone, if they are working against instead of with each other, can create invisible burdens which take as much effort to overcome as though they were tangible obstacles.

#### “ . . . NORMAL TO FEEL INFERIOR ”

And, the person who spends his life improperly integrated will never be able to understand either others or himself. He will assume that the state of affairs is normal and feel inferior because others seem to have the power to achieve in spite of the burden. I have been able to change and see the difference. Perhaps it may help to free others. But there is a much more serious issue than anyone realizes and that is *recognition* of the problem. I don't fault my son when he comes home discouraged because at school the class had to run a lap and he literally couldn't make it around the track. He had to stop and rest and then walk the rest of the way. I fault the teacher, who made up the ironic penalty that the last one to finish had to run an extra lap.

This matter of control which the integration of both “sides” gives one imparts a mental control also. I was coward, with all the name implies, until I got some results with my eyes. Then the cowardice decreased, in relation to the improvement. I can vouch for the truth of the old saw that the coward dies a thousand deaths, the hero dies but once. Out of my experience, however, I give no credit to the “hero.” His courage is something that is built into him, that he doesn't think about twice, and

certainly never goes through any mental anguish over. I can talk because I have had both experiences. It is not enough to point out that a boy who, every time he got into a fight and was the recipient of a thorough thrashing, would avoid fights. This again ignores the confusion of the fight itself, and the pain. It does not take into account the many, many times the fight is fought before and after the actual event, with always the same result, and, with a vivid imagination, the feeling of the pain over and over again. I spent most of my youth hating myself for the demeaning things I had to do to keep from taking physical punishment. Later, when I started to feel integrated about so many things, I have been put into physically dangerous situations and not only didn't give it a thought beforehand, but when I had to actually engage in it. I realized that my sensation of pain and my tolerance of it were completely different from what they had been. Before my emergence, my tolerance of pain was extremely small. As little a thing as someone slapping me on the back would be intolerable. It would seem to blot out everything else so that I was only conscious of the pain. It bore a direct relation to the whole space situation. The pain was not located in my back, or at a finger. It did not have a position of space away from my brain, although I knew if it was my back or my finger which was hurting. But just as a voice happened at my ear, although I knew it was coming from a person, so the pain happened at my "point of consciousness" and blocked everything else out. Even something which would have ordinarily been easy to handle became intolerable. Somehow if it had stayed at its point of origin, I would have been able to handle it correctly. I know because now when I am hurt it does stay put, and I can tolerate many times more of it.

A peculiar property of my eyes when they were in their worst condition was to immediate-

ly spot something out of place. This does not seem to add up with the problem, but I could walk into a room and immediately would be conscious of where two panels of wallpaper didn't match, or a spot on someone's clothing.

Another visual situation I remember distinctly was a problem when two lines, each moving, crossed each other. For instance, when watching a person walk across in front of me, I found I had to watch one leg and then the other, and then the first one again, switching each time a step was over. It is only very recently that I can gaze at the field the two legs are in and see them both moving as one piece. The effect I used to get when the legs crossed was that of being attracted to the point at which the lines met; this is, the point at which the leading edge of one leg met the trailing edge of the other. As the legs came closer and closer together, this point moved downwards. Then which they crossed and started getting further and further apart, this point moved upwards. This prevailed whenever two lines of any sort passed each other. It may have been a midline problem. I don't have the least vestige of it when my eyes are right. It was as though each eye was focused on a different leg, therefore a different plane.

#### "I COULD NOT REST IN BALANCE"

I remember in college that the usual position of ease when the fellows stood in the hallways and corridors was leaning back against the wall at an angle. I could never do this for any length of time at all without having a most uncomfortable feeling, as though I was pressing hard against the wall, and soon my right back muscles would hurt. I recall another time when I went to a doctor and told him how

uncomfortable I was in bed, as I felt that my head was pushing against the pillow as hard as it could, as my back was stiff as a board. In both these situations, it seems to me now, I could not rest in balance, but my right side had to work all the time to keep me balanced. Since the left side was ignored and the muscles all relaxed, the poor right side had to push against the wall to keep me from falling over, and my head and back pushed against the bed to give me a feeling of being in balance. In dancing also, I recall painfully, I could only get by, and at that could only turn or move in one direction – and the right back muscles would start giving me pain. Many times I was literally dancing with tears in my eyes to continue the whole dance with a desirable partner, or to keep from having a girl feel offended if I said I could not dance any longer. I also had similar balance problems in simple situations like going around a corner in an auto. I used to have to reach up with my left hand and hold to the window post if I was making a left turn to keep my body from going to the right. Indeed, I drove much of the time with my right hand pressed against the seat to balance myself. And in walking alongside of someone, I invariably veered off to the right and bumped into him. I also invariably blamed him for bumping into me. Today I can walk straight without thinking of it, and in making a left turn my two sides compensate together and keep me erect and in balance without any effort or knowledge on my part.

I won't even go into the effect of alcohol on me. Early in the game I gave up even trying to drink with the fellows. It had a most uncomfortable reaction in which I started to lose authority over the few controls I had at my

command. There was no exhilaration, just more confusion and nausea. I take a drink occasionally today, and it has a pleasant relaxing feeling, but even so I don't think I have more than eight or ten drinks a year.

## COMPLEX READING PROBLEMS

In the matter of reading, my case is most complex. I had to learn to read while the reading matter was going through a series of gymnastics. At this time I had a marked horizontal imbalance and a slight vertical imbalance. As a result, each time my eyes moved from one spot to another, they not only separated, but one dropped to a position of rest well below the other. Thus, the printing not only doubled, but seemed to run in an opposite direction to the eye shift, and in addition one image dropped below the other. When the eyes stopped at the new position, one set of letters had to move over and up into position with the other (in fact, the entire field so moved). Coupled to the fact that I could not look at one spot for more than a split second without shifting away and back again and nausea, I find it a miracle that I learned to read at all. What did happen, however, was that I learned to see one letter at a time, then later, one word at a time, and I always verbalized so that the net effect was that I was reading a book to myself. I notice that as my eyes work more and more as one piece, the span is a single percept and the page seems to remain stationary. This verbalizing then diminishes. Lately, the entire field becomes a flow of ideas from the page to my brain without the intermediate step of saying the words so that I hear them internally. This inability to handle things on a visual level formed many other patterns for me. Words have always been the important medium for me. Even in my television work I am much less aware of and work much less with camera angles and composition and visual production values than I do with words and ideas.

## PREREQUISITE FOR A COMEDY WRITER

Regarding the locking-on sensation with vision: When I looked a person in the eye it was really exactly that. I locked on to one eye or the other, and there was a great empathetic reaction on my part. No space existed between us and we were almost like one. It's very hard to explain. I also had the feeling when at a lecture that, when the lecturer's eye was looking directly at me, he was seeing me and only me out of the entire audience. Not knowing what it was to look at an entire audience as a unit without fixing directly on one person, I felt the lecturer had the same experience. As a matter of fact, when I have lectured — and I have only accepted these dates out of an internal "dare," to prove to myself that I could do it — I invariably locked on to one person in the audience and couldn't look away. Incidentally, most of these lecture dates were at colleges and for the theater arts departments on the subject of television comedy writing. I invariably told the students that the necessary prerequisite for a comedy writer is a major psychological maladjustment in childhood. I qualify eminently. The point being that, unless there is some stress which permits you to observe and operate from a platform off the norm, there is no basis for humor. Essentially, comedy writers hate society. This profession gives them a safe, well paid method of baring people's weaknesses and mistakes, of making fun of them, of demeaning them. I wonder sometimes whether as I grow

more normal, or go sane, I will still be able to write comedy. I hope so. However, if I find I can't write a lick, I can always be just a producer. — *549 Moreno Avenue, Los Angeles, Calif.*

### GLOSSARY

*orthoptic exercises: Visual training.*

*superposition: To place one visual image in the space occupied by another, so that the two figures coincide, one upon another.*

*stereopsis: Visual perception of depth.*

*congenitally blind: To be born blind.*

*fusion. The blending of the images seen by the two eyes into one perfect image producing binocular vision.*

*diplopia: Double vision, due usually to weakness or paralysis of some of the ocular muscles in consequence of which the image of an object falls upon noncorresponding portions of the two retinas, and is seen as two identical objects rather than one.*

*parallax: The apparent displacement of an object by a change in the position from which it is viewed.*

*percept: The thing perceived; the complete mental image, formed by the process of perception, of an object present in space.*

*foveal area: A small pit or depression at the back of the retina forming the point of sharpest vision (fovea centralis).*

*midline problem: The median plane of the body is a midline; when the two sides of the body operate divergently, the individual is said to have a "midline problem."*



Born in San Francisco, November 11, 1913, Jess Oppenheimer went to Stanford University. Had he graduated from Stanford, he would have been in the Class of '35, however, he decided to trade his senior year for a trip around the world with his family. The decision turned out to be a good one in terms of contributing to his later career as a writer.

Jess Oppenheimer started in radio in San Francisco in 1935 on the old "Blue Monday Jamboree," the first coast-to-coast, commercial radio entertainment program. As a comedian, he received \$7.50, less 75 cents commission to the Artist's Bureau, for both writing and performing. With his limited vocal and physical controls the experience of performing was a horrendous one for him, and he thereafter restricted himself to writing.

In 1937, Mr. Oppenheimer went to Hollywood and was employed on "The Packard Hour," a radio program starring Fred Astaire. From there he wrote for Jack Benny, "The Screen Guild Program," and the "Rudy Vallee-John Barrymore Show"; he wrote, directed and produced "Baby Snooks" for about eight years. After getting out of the service, he and Lucille Ball, appeared on the radio program, "My Favorite Husband." He created and produced the pilot for "I Love Lucy" in 1950 and has been in television since then, writing and producing a string of specials and series. He has won two Emmys and has been nominated six or seven times. He was also the recipient of the Sylvania Award in 1952.

Currently, Mr. Oppenheimer is concentrating mainly on inventions, mostly pertaining to the fields of his disability, visual and physical. Some of them he finds quite exciting. He has just had a patent issued on a pair of spectacles, each glass of which alternates, by electrical means, between opaque and transparent. Set at the right alternating speed, they accomplish the same effect as a patch over one eye does in the treatment of amblyopia, while avoiding the problem of vision-occluded accidents. The patient sees with both eyes, but only one at a time.

Another most exciting concept, for which patents are applied, is in the field of athletic swings. In the field of golf, for instance, an arm from this machine holds the club below the player's hands. It offers no resistance to movement in any direction; but as the player swings at the ball, every movement is sensed electronically and fed into a computer. The swings of many pros can thus be recorded. Once the pros' swings are in the memory system, a learner can choose which swing he wishes to emulate. The computer adjusts for differences in size between him and, say, Sam Snead. The learner then can move the club, but only in an exact replica of Snead's swing. This concept can be applied to any physical move.

Jess Oppenheimer married Estelle Weiss in 1947. Their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary was celebrated in August after which they went to Israel to visit their daughter, Joanne, now Mrs. Norman Davis, who lives on a kibbutz atop the Golan Heights. She is expecting their first grandchild. The Oppenheimers plan to return by way of Boston to visit their son, Gregg, who is a senior at MIT.

The talented Mr. Oppenheimer has served on the boards of Vista del Mar, City of Hope, and R.E.A.L., an organization devoted to the education of exceptional children. He has also served two terms as a governor of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.



*Jess Oppenheimer*