

## Are Poltergeists Living or Are They Dead?

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### INTRODUCTION

From accounts of poltergeists reported before the middle of the nineteenth century, such as those reviewed by Podmore (14, 15), Lang (9), and Owen (13), one gains the impression that the investigators of such cases thought principally of only two theories to account for them: fraud and discarnate human agency. If one turns then to accounts of poltergeists written (roughly) after the middle of the nineteenth century, one gains the impression that the investigators of these later cases also thought principally of only two theories to account for them: fraud and living human agency. The change of favored interpretations was noticed by Podmore, who described it (in 1897) as follows:

To the writers of two or three generations ago, as to the Neo-Platonists and the early Fathers, these performances [poltergeist phenomena] were the clumsy practical jokes of an ill-disposed demon. To the modern believer they appear as extra-corporeal manifestations of the psychic force of the medium (14, p. 136).

How are we to account for these differences in principal theories? We can accept Podmore's opinion (15) that the evidence of trickery in some cases, combined with evidence of malobservation in others, justifies our believing that reports of ostensibly paranormal phenomena in the poltergeist branch of psychical research should all be attributed to fraud which is sometimes detected and sometimes not. Fifty years later West (21) came to essentially the same opinion. Against this view, however, there exists an accumulation of evidence

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my thanks to Swami Krishnanand, Mr. Arthur W. Osborn, Professor P. Pal, and Dr. J. G. Pratt, who all assisted materially in the preparation of this paper.

from reliable observers (or reporters) of at least a small number of cases which do not lend themselves easily to being explained away as all due to trickery and malobservation (1, 2, 13, 16, 17, 18). So we are entitled (almost compelled, I would say) to go on investigating new cases as if each might provide even better evidence of paranormal processes than any of its predecessors.

But why do we need to be limited to only one type of theory of paranormal process during each century? The rejection of the theory of discarnate influence and its supplanting by that of living human agency probably occurred because of the demonstration of paranormal physical phenomena by certain persons not claiming the assistance of discarnate spirits. D. D. Home, for example, did not attribute the extraordinary physical phenomena occurring in his presence to a discarnate spirit aiding their manifestation (4), so why should such a role be assigned to any other similar case? It seems to me entirely reasonable to consider living human agency as a possible hypothesis to account for some genuine poltergeist phenomena. But if any cases were in fact caused by discarnate agents it is most unlikely that their contributions ceased just because psychical researchers happened to think of another possibility. I should think it on the whole more likely that parapsychologists have changed their fashions of thinking than that the agencies have changed, although this is also possible. It may just be true here, as so often in science, that one theory has been pushed up while another was pushed down when both may be correct, one in some cases and the other in other cases. To illustrate the possibility that parapsychologists should again consider discarnate agencies in poltergeist phenomena, I shall describe two cases reported to me in India during 1969 and 1971 by informants who seem to me reliable. To these I shall add a third relevant case reprinted from earlier sources. The reader must remember that I am not asserting that discarnate agencies *must* have been responsible for the phenomena reported in these cases. (As a matter of fact, I cannot positively assert that *any* paranormal processes occurred in the cases, although I think some did in each one.) I am merely stating that discarnate agencies *may* have been responsible for the phenomena and I propose to use these (and other cases) in building recommendations for an analysis of large numbers of cases which might advance our understanding of the subject.

The publication of these case reports will have the additional advantage of bringing to Western readers accounts of two Asian poltergeist manifestations. In the larger analysis of cases that I propose it will be important to include cases from different cultures.

## CASE REPORTS

1. *The Case of Sisir Kumar*

This case is an old one and an unfortunately long gap occurred between the events of the case and its first recording. Nevertheless, two informants who impressed me as reliable gave independent testimony that was concordant on the essential details.

Professor P. Pal, of Chinsurah, West Bengal, first communicated information to me about this case in a written report which he sent me in 1969. He based his report on the testimony of a firsthand witness whom he had interviewed twice, in 1968 and 1969. This was Nalinish Mitra, who was a youth at the time of the disturbances to be described. Later Nalinish Mitra studied law, and for a time practiced as a lawyer. Still later he renounced worldly life, became a monk, and ultimately was named president of the Ramakrishna Ashram of Baranagore, Calcutta. His religious name is Swami Nirvedananda. He was a disciple of Swami Satyananda, a saintly monk who founded the ashram of which Swami Nirvedananda himself later became head.

In the autumn of 1969, when I was in West Bengal, I visited (with Professor Pal) Swami Nirvedananda at the Ramakrishna Ashram in Baranagore. Swami Nirvedananda then read the account Professor Pal had written out based on his earlier statements. He made a few corrections of details and declared the account correct as he remembered the events. I made some additional notes of other details which he mentioned and which Professor Pal had not included in his report. The same day I also visited with Professor Pal another firsthand witness of the disturbances, Sri Lala Hemanta Kumar, a practicing lawyer of Calcutta. I made notes of his testimony and supplemented it by a sketch of the house in which the disturbances occurred. Lala Hemanta Kumar is about the same age as Swami Nirvedananda—namely, about sixty-five years old (in 1969).

Subsequently Professor Pal obtained additional information from both the informants and transmitted this to me in a letter dated September 7, 1970.

In February, 1971, I was in Calcutta once more and (again with the assistance of Professor Pal) I was able to interview a third informant, Sri Benoy Kumar Lala, a lawyer of Calcutta born in 1911. He was a first cousin of Sisir Kumar, the subject of the case. He was about eight years of age at the time of the disturbances. He was not a firsthand witness of any phenomena, but during the period of activity he heard every day about the case from his father, Sisir Kumar's uncle. His father visited the affected house daily

during the disturbances and brought back information about them to his family. Benoy Kumar Lala was not in a position to add new details to the case beyond those I had already learned about, but his remembrance of what he heard from his father at the time the case was active supported the testimony of the two firsthand witnesses Professor Pal<sup>2</sup> and I had already interviewed.

The subject of the case (I deliberately avoid the use of the word "agent" here since this tends to bias judgment precisely in the direction I wish to avoid) was Sisir Kumar, the son of Lala Triloknath, an executive engineer of the Bengal-Bihar State Service. Sisir Kumar was born in (approximately) 1903. His father died about 1914. The family house in Suri, District Birbham, West Bengal, was thereafter occupied by the surviving members of his extended family, including his widow, his children, his brothers and their wives, and various nephews and nieces. Lala Hemanta Kumar was a first cousin of Sisir Kumar who visited and stayed in the house from time to time. He was living in the house with his father during the first month of the disturbances. Swami Nirvedananda (Nalinish Mitra in those days) was an intimate friend of Sisir Kumar and his cousins and often visited the house, but did not live there. He lived nearby. Both Lala Hemanta Kumar and Nalinish Mitra were about the same age as Sisir Kumar.

The disturbances took place in 1919, so the first written account (other than a brief newspaper report which appeared at the time) was not prepared until fifty years later. It is therefore of importance that the testimonies of Swami Nirvedananda and Lala Hemanta Kumar accord in all the essentials of the case, although they differ in some details. Apart from the usual differences in memories of the different witnesses, their accounts differed by reason of the different opportunities they had for observation or talking with other witnesses. Sisir Kumar himself died of tuberculosis about 1938.

I shall next describe the several types of phenomena reported by my informants. They were not themselves the eyewitnesses of all the phenomena observed, but if not, then they heard about the observations of other members of the family on the same day. Although I have divided the phenomena into types (in order to emphasize the occurrence of events in a poltergeist case additional to simple or complicated movements of objects), the reader should remember that these various manifestations did not occur simultaneously, but rather intermingled in sequence. Also, in an effort

to improve understanding, I have mentioned some of the events under more than one of the categories of the phenomena.

*Physical phenomena:* Bricks or brickbats were thrown into the house through windows from the compound and also into the compound from some other place of origin.

The first incident occurred in the afternoon at dusk when Sisir Kumar and his young friends were chatting and playing games in a room. They heard a sound as of falling objects in an adjoining room. Rushing in there, they found brickbats lying in the room. The window was open, but nobody could be seen outside. Lala Hemanta Kumar was a firsthand witness of this episode.

Bottles inside rooms flew out. Once a pewter vessel which had been on a table in the house flew out into the compound and landed at the feet of one of the inhabitants. On at least two occasions Lala Hemanta Kumar saw brickbats flying into the courtyard from outside. Police were stationed around the house to catch a possible mischief-monger, but no one was found and brickbats came flying into the house even when the policemen were on duty around it.

Food that had been prepared, cooked, and left in the kitchen disappeared mysteriously.<sup>3</sup> On at least one occasion when Sisir tried to eat, food was knocked out of his hand.

Some herb roots wrapped in a yellow cloth suddenly appeared in Sisir's hand one night and at about the same time he received a communication from his deceased father instructing him to attach the roots to his arm with a copper band to save him from the evil designs of a female spirit. The family, following these instructions only partially, at first attached the roots to Sisir's arm with only a thread or tape. Shortly afterwards, when Sisir was in the lavatory, the tape was mysteriously cut and the roots fell to the floor. At the same time Nalinish, Lala Hemanta Kumar, and some others present heard a female voice say: "I have taken it away. How now?" Sisir ran out of the lavatory, stretched his arm under a bedstead, and recovered the roots which were there. He said his father told him he (the father) had seized the roots from the female spirit and guided him to find them under the bed. A smith was then called in and he riveted an iron band (with the roots attached) to Sisir's arm. The metal band was 5-6 mm. in diameter. Sisir's mother and uncle thought iron more efficacious

<sup>2</sup> Professor Pal read a draft of this portion of the paper and, after making some corrections, approved my account of the case of Sisir Kumar as accurate according to his knowledge of the events.

<sup>3</sup> The paranormal disappearance of food is occasionally reported in India. In a case of the reincarnation type that I have studied in Uttar Pradesh, the subject claimed that after his death in the previous life he (as a discarnate spirit) stayed near the house of his family and sometimes took the food they prepared. His statements accorded with observations by the family that some food they had prepared had in fact mysteriously disappeared during this period.

than copper and so again ignored the instructions that seemed to come from the spirit of Sisir's father advising them to bind the roots to the arm with a copper band. Soon after this was done, witnesses sitting around to encourage Sisir heard a sound as of metal being cut through and the iron band<sup>4</sup> fell off his arm. It was found to have been cleanly cut as if by some instrument. (Nalinish and Lala Hemanta Kumar were firsthand witnesses of this episode.)

Sisir then heard his father saying that he had advised using a copper band and the smith, called again, attached the roots this time with a copper band around his arm. This band remained undisturbed.

*Visual or apparitional phenomena:* Two types of human figures were seen by witnesses during the disturbances. On one occasion, at the time the disturbances were just beginning, several witnesses observed two human hands approaching Sisir. These were recognized by Sisir's mother as those of her husband, Sisir's dead father. Sisir had several visions of his father beckoning to him or seeming to warn him. He also, as already mentioned, had several auditory communications seeming to come from his father.

Witnesses also observed a female figure with varying degrees of clarity. Swami Nirvedananda had no apparitional experience himself and Lala Hemanta Kumar saw only a rather shadowy female figure wearing a sari with a red border near the well of the house. Other persons, however, saw the female figure more distinctly. Sisir himself saw a young woman in a red-bordered sari with the red circle of vermilion on her forehead (the mark of wifehood among Hindu women) and dishevelled hair. He saw this figure just after the cloth tape (with the attached roots) had been cut from his arm. And he heard the female figure saying: "I have taken it away. How now?" (Swami Nirvedananda said that he also heard these words.) Then Sisir had a vision of his father showing him where the roots were under the bed and when he searched there he found the roots. On another occasion Sisir saw the female figure standing at the gate of the house.

Other witnesses saw the female figure peeping out of the windows in the upper story of the house several times. One of Sisir's aunts had the clearest (and evidently most frequent) experiences of seeing this female figure. She related the apparition of the figure to the flying bricks. She said she saw the female figure stooping to lift bricks and would warn other members of the house before a brick

would come flying into the house. The other persons present only saw the flying brick on these occasions.

*Auditory or mediumistic communications:* During the disturbances Sisir heard voices communicating with him. As already mentioned, some such communications came ostensibly from his father. He first heard his father speak at the time of the appearance of the herb roots. His father said to him: "A spirit is trying to harm you. But don't worry. I am helping." The father then gave instructions for Sisir to wear the amulet of roots around his arm.

Sisir also reported communications from the female figure. These apparently occurred at least partly in trance-like states of altered consciousness. I have already mentioned the first of these communications in connection with the cutting of the tape around his arm when Sisir heard the female spirit exultantly claiming she had taken away the amulet of herbal roots. Later, other communications from the female figure narrated her claim to have been his wife in a previous life in Benares. Sisir, she claimed, had deserted her then. She waited some time, evidently for him to die, and then committed suicide. "Since then," said the female communicator, "I have been searching for you. I will take you away." She further said she had found Sisir in Benares during the previous March. (In fact, some members of the family, including Sisir, had been to Benares the previous March, but naturally all present knew this.) The female communicator gave an address in Benares where she and Sisir in their previous lives, according to her, had lived up to twenty years earlier. Inquiries were made of the residents at the address given, but they were tenants who knew nothing about residents of twenty years earlier. So these communications about a previous life in Benares remain unverified.

In some of his trances Sisir saw the female figure offering him lemonade or something to eat. He then immediately had a vision of his father snatching away the food or drink in a protective gesture. This implied that the drink and food offered were poisonous or at least noxious.

The various phenomena described lasted for about two months. Sisir seemed gradually to come more and more under the influence of the female communicator. He acted as if under her will somewhat like a hypnotized subject. He lost weight. Eventually his family (apparently under the direction of a communication from Sisir's father) took Sisir to a center of the goddess Bhadra Kali in the neighboring village of Rajnagar. Appropriate rituals of intercession were carried out there and these were followed by a complete cessation of the poltergeist phenomena and also of the apparitional experiences and Sisir's trances. He completed his education and

<sup>4</sup> The informants gave discrepant testimony about whether the first band was of copper or iron, but agreed on the essential detail of an apparent paranormal severing of a metal band placed around Sisir's arm.

had no further psychological disturbances up to the time of his death from tuberculosis nearly eighteen years later.

## 2. *The Case of Radhika*

My information for this case comes from a single informant, Swami Krishnanand of Bhadran, Gujarat. Swami Krishnanand is a Hindu monk of simple, almost ascetic habits who travels extensively in India studying religious experiences and paranormal phenomena as they come to his attention. He has had a number of apparently paranormal experiences himself. He has published accounts of some of his experiences and observations in several books. One of these books (7) contains accounts of some cases of the reincarnation type and was brought to my attention by a correspondent in Ceylon. The ensuing correspondence with Swami Krishnanand led to his kindly acting as my interpreter for five days of case studies in Gujarat in the autumn of 1969. During our time together Swami Krishnanand told me about some of his as yet unpublished experiences, including the one I am about to describe.<sup>5</sup> He has already published a report (7) of a similar case.

Among the various types of experiences occurring in India which may be loosely comprised under the term "possession," one type corresponds in some features with mediumistic trances of the West.<sup>6</sup> In this type of possession the subject (according to this interpretation of what happens) allows his body to be possessed temporarily by a discarnate spirit so that this spirit may enjoy once again the carnal pleasures, such as sex and alcohol, that he relished in his previous incarnate existence and can no longer experience after physical death. According to the usual interpretation of these cases, such temporary possession of the subject's body permits the discarnate spirit to satiate himself again in such activities. After doing so he "returns" the body to its ordinary owner. In return for such temporary use of the subject's body, the discarnate spirit

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Swami Krishnanand for answering questions about the case of Radhika that I put to him in subsequent correspondence. He also read a draft of this portion of the paper and approved it as accurate according to his memory of the events he witnessed.

<sup>6</sup> When I compare these "possession" states to mediumship in the West, I refer to the voluntary rapid and complete change of personality which takes place both in Western trance mediumship and in these apparently possessed subjects. However, the motives of the subjects differ. The Western medium enters trance so that his control may communicate messages from himself or other discarnate communicators; the possessed subject of the group under consideration here enters trance in order to allow the controlling discarnate spirit to use his body for physical pleasures. The apparent motive of these latter cases reminds one of the Chinese proverb cited by Wavell (20, p. 29): "To be a thousand days a ghost is not equal to being one day a man."

is available as a kind of "servant" to perform various tasks at the wish of the subject. I asked Swami Krishnanand why such discarnate spirits could not get themselves reincarnated so that they could debauch themselves more regularly and more conveniently in their own physical bodies, but Swami Krishnanand did not know the answer to this question.

In the course of his travels Swami Krishnanand has met several of these subjects who are known in India as sorcerers because of the paranormal feats they accomplish. According to Swami Krishnanand, the performance of physical phenomena by such sorcerers may provide the subject with a false appearance of holiness and some such persons attract a throng of disciples and worshipers. The public performance of paranormal feats is nearly always a sign that the subject is in fact *not* a saint, but more likely a person locked in association with a discarnate spirit of evil tendencies. Once these associations are formed they are exceedingly difficult to dissolve, at least by the living subject.

Swami Krishnanand met the subject of the present case in the village of Degaon in the state of Maharashtra (south of Bombay) where he had gone for some rest and a quiet place to work. He was there about the year 1967. He had not been settled long in the village when he learned that a woman called Radhika had the reputation in the village of being a sorceress. Mysterious disappearances of food had occurred in the village and it was eventually found that the missing food was turning up in Radhika's dwelling. The angry villagers insisted that she stop these practices of "apportioning" their food away and they promised, if she would do so, to furnish food regularly to her. Thus she would not have to work for food. She had therefore given up the exercise of her powers at the time Swami Krishnanand moved to Degaon.

Swami Krishnanand has a formula for relieving the intense pain of scorpion sting.<sup>7</sup> Happening to apply his formula to a suffering villager with success, he quickly developed a reputation for being able to relieve such pains and acquired a considerable clientele. One day Radhika came to the hut where Swami Krishnanand lived and worked and begged him to relieve the pain from a scorpion sting she had just received. Swami Krishnanand wanted to witness an exhibition of her paranormal powers and so he offered to relieve her pain if she would demonstrate them to

<sup>7</sup> Swami Krishnanand's formula is called a yantra and consists of making a line drawing of a particular pattern on the skin of the area where the pain of the scorpion sting is felt. The process (and for that matter the success) of this yantra is not relevant to the present subject. Suffice it to add, however, that in a scorpion-infested village as many as twenty persons a day would come to Swami Krishnanand for the application of his yantra. So they evidently were convinced of its value. Swami Krishnanand has described his yantra in one of his books (6, p. 58-68).

him. She refused on the ground of her pact with the villagers by which she had agreed not to steal any more food. But when Swami Krishnanand said that he would accept responsibility for any food she might take, and that otherwise he would not treat her scorpion sting pain, Radhika agreed to his request. Swami Krishnanand then pointed to a house about a hundred feet away. He told Radhika that he had been invited to dinner there and that he knew the women of the house were just then preparing puran puris<sup>8</sup> for the evening meal. He asked Radhika to bring him some of the puran puris from this house. He then heard her mutter a few words and almost immediately saw two puran puris come flying through the air and land at his feet. Swami Krishnanand's hut was surrounded by a six-foot wall so that the puris had to rise over this (in their course from the kitchen), and then descend. The wall prevented Swami Krishnanand from seeing whether anyone was between the hut compound and the house. (Such a person could presumably have thrown the puris over the wall.) But Swami Krishnanand is sure that he saw the puris moving through the air straight and steadily and then slowly descend and settle on the ground in front of him. Also noteworthy is the fact (as I know myself from having eaten some) that puran puris are rather soft and if thrown as high as say seven feet would almost certainly disintegrate when they landed.

Swami Krishnanand and Radhika were standing outside his hut when these puris reached him. He then asked her to repeat the feat while they were inside his hut, which they then entered. Two more puran puris promptly came flying into his house and then slowly landed on the floor. On this second occasion the breads would have had to pass not only, as before, out of a door or window in the kitchen of the house where they were being prepared, but also through the rather low open door of Swami Krishnanand's house. (This "flight plan" virtually eliminated the possibility that some confederate of Radhika had thrown the puran puris on a signal from her.) The persons in the kitchen missed the puran puris and came running out of the house in search of them; evidently they suspected that Radhika had broken her pledge not to steal food. The surprise and anger of his hosts provided Swami Krishnanand with further evidence of the genuineness of the phenomena he had witnessed.

Swami Krishnanand told me that he did not see the puran puris throughout their entire apparent flight from the kitchen to his hut. He saw only the last portion of their flight as they appeared before

<sup>8</sup> Puran puris are a sweet, bread-like food. They are circular and of about the size and consistency of American pancakes.

him. But he did definitely see them in the air before they landed. This would seem to be then, accepting some paranormal interpretation, a case of paranormal transportation, not one of dematerialization with subsequent rematerialization at the new site.

As a further test, however, he asked Radhika to perform two other tasks. He asked her to make the puran puris, which were by this time in a basket in his house, float up from the basket. The puran puris promptly began to jump around in the basket. Swami Krishnanand then pointed to a lota<sup>9</sup> which he held in his hand and to a man who was milking a cow some distance away, and asked to have some of the milk put into the lota. Instantly the lota became filled with milk and at the same time the milker noticed that his own vessel had less, rather than more, milk in it. He looked up astonished. Swami Krishnanand did not see any milk "in flight." Before each of these four events Radhika muttered a few words, presumably the instructions to her allied discarnate spirit.

Swami Krishnanand was in Degaon again in 1971 and asked Radhika if she would demonstrate her powers before him and myself during my planned visit to India in the autumn of 1971, but she declined to do so.

### 3. *The Case of Fanny Roberts*<sup>10</sup>

This case occurred in England in the mid-nineteenth century. It is therefore old and liable to discredit among persons who think that evidence, however good originally, becomes worse with the passage of time. A detailed report of the case was written soon after the events by a witness of education and reliability. He was Dr. J. Garth Wilkinson, a physician and author who was a biographer of Emanuel Swedenborg. Dr. Wilkinson sent the account, part of which is reproduced below, in two letters to Henry James, Sr., the father of William James and Henry James, the novelist. These letters were dated September 2 and 18, 1847. The correspondence came into the possession of Dr. Clement J. Wilkinson,

<sup>9</sup> A small metal vessel for liquids.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Arthur W. Osborn kindly gave me permission to use this case, which was originally published by him in *The Superphysical* (11) and subsequently in *The Meaning of Personal Existence* (12, pp. 60-63). Although the Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois, kindly gave permission for citation of the case from *The Meaning of Personal Existence*, I have used the copy of the original typescript sent to me by Mr. Osborn.

Mr. Osborn refers to the case in his books as the Wilkinson Case because of the name of the reporter. However, since Fanny Roberts was apparently the sole percipient of visual phenomena and seems to have been the principal subject, I have called the case by her name.

the nephew of Dr. Garth Wilkinson. He had copies typed out in 1907 and sent a set to his cousin, Mrs. Arthur W. Osborn, née Wilkinson. Mr. Arthur W. Osborn has furnished me with a photostat copy of the typed version of Dr. Garth Wilkinson's letters to Henry James, Sr., from one of which my quotations are taken.

The subject of the case was Mrs. Fanny Roberts. She was the sister-in-law of George Wilkinson, the brother of Dr. Garth Wilkinson.

I quote next the relevant passages from Dr. Wilkinson's letter of September 2, 1847, in which he described the main phenomena of the case:

You may perhaps remember that within the last twelve months we have lost by death my grandmother, who was one of our best friends and intensely wedded to her family, especially to me and mine. She was a woman of small reach of mind, yet of the most powerful character in her loves; anxious about this world to a singular extent; always wishing to direct the ménage wherever she was, and to impress indelibly her own image upon whatever things and circumstances she came in contact with, however trivial. This character increased with her advancing age, and at 84, when she passed away, her will was the most irresistible, and its objects the most trifling. To the last she imagined that nothing could go on without her immediate assistance . . . . I never knew a spirit so little abstract, or one which I should think would separate from Nature more hardly than hers . . . .

Within a fortnight after [her] decease our bedroom . . . became the theater of strange noises or tapplings. The first time the thing occurred—three taps, most low, yet impressive and commanding—we [Dr. Wilkinson and his wife] were both awakened by it simultaneously, and, falling asleep again after mutually remarking the singularity of the sounds, we were both infested by dreams so heavily uncomfortable that we were rendered bodily ill by the event for two days afterwards . . . . The noises continued for more than three months, sometimes every night, sometimes less frequently. For a long time it [the noises] never occurred without striking peculiar fear into our hearts . . . . Our little boy, also, was frequently affected in the night in a most disagreeable way, and . . . manifested that the source of his discomfort was the same as that of ours. By degrees I became callous, and have often been reading in bed when the tapping was going on . . . . On one occasion when it began I cried out indignantly, "Go it!" The tapping came again . . . with the apparent quickness of indignation. Again I said, "Go it!" and as fast as words could be uttered, this and the noise were repeated six times on both sides; after which it went away for that night.

Our visitors also heard it, and particularly George [Dr. Wilkinson's brother], who was very unbelieving until one night that he passed under our roof, when a single set of taps projected him—a confirmed and terrified believer—out of bed and house at once, to take

refuge in a night coffee shop, and read the yesterday's *Times* and *Chambers Journal*, until the full morning. The noises occurred once at Hampstead, and only once, two days after our arrival here . . . . We tried for weeks to account for the taps upon natural principles. My wife, however . . . from the moment of the first taps, declared she knew too well the sound of the old lady's leather-padded stick . . . and that there was no mistake about the matter. For the tapper now and then came down in an evening into our parlor and padded about there, as in the bedroom.

Simultaneously with this, similar, yet peculiar, footsteps . . . were ever and anon heard at the Veterinary College where the old lady died. My sister living there was in constant fear . . . and her health has greatly suffered from her state of mind. Other members of the family experienced the same at this place, and particularly George and his wife . . . . Were I to retail all the phenomena it would fill a volume . . . .

Two months since, George's wife's sister [Fanny Roberts] came to London . . . and took up her residence near the College. A fortnight after her arrival she was seized with violent convulsions resembling epilepsy, and I was sent at midnight to visit her. She continued in fits for nearly six hours, and at the end of this time, finding other remedies useless, I mesmerized her. This . . . sent her into a deep sleep. Her mesmeric sleep has been almost uninterrupted up to the present time . . . . Her case [at first] exhibited only the ordinary phenomena of the mesmeric sleep, but within this time [ten days] she walked one day to the Veterinary College to visit her sister, and while there had so violent a fit that it was impossible to remove her, and a bed was made up for her in a room adjoining that in which George and his wife sleep. Here, within the last four days, strange things have befallen her.

In the middle of the night . . . she cried out to George, "Oh, what a funny old woman there is, sitting at the bottom of my bed!" George went into her room and mesmerized her, and the presence then disappeared. No sooner, however, had he gone than the visitant was there again, and this time Fanny sprang out of bed and bedroom, calling out, "Oh, George, it is no delusion: it is your grandmother."

She described the old lady in colors which could not be mistaken, and even imitated her looks and attitudes in a most wonderful manner, giving also all particulars to her dress. Five or six times was the visit repeated to the terror-stricken patient in the course of the night; and on one occasion the spirit sat on her legs, which, as she said, "Nearly destroyed her" . . . . The old lady insisted upon shaking hands with Fanny, and George . . . saw her with grasped, yet not closed, hand, perform *her* part of the salutation.

After this she [Fanny] told us that from having loved this world too much the old lady was unresting in the other . . . and unless certain things were attended to at once concerning her effects, she would continue to disturb the family . . . . Fanny then went into the most minute description of certain goods and chattels, old dresses and the like which were in particular places, and which were to be



disposed of as the old lady dictated. Some of these have been found, some of them not yet, but anxious search is [being made] for them . . . .

A word now respecting Fanny. She is one of the most artless creatures in the world. Of the very existence of her spiritual visitant she knew nothing but that a Grandmama had lately died and left George a little money. Of George's family she knew hardly anything . . . . I never, in fine, saw a young woman I should less expect deception in, than her.

*Comments on this case:* It is probable, and not denied in Dr. Wilkinson's letters, that Fanny Roberts had heard something from her in-laws about the disturbances in the home noticed by other members of the family prior to her own arrival there. This knowledge could account for a visual experience based on expectations, but not for Fanny's apparently paranormal knowledge of the deceased grandmother's clothes and other possessions.

If anyone should object that this case includes only knocks, raps, visual experiences, and mediumistic communications, but no movement of objects and that it should therefore not be considered a poltergeist case, I shall remind him that in its German origin the word "poltergeist" means a "noisy spirit." The word was originally applied to the agents of knocks only, but has subsequently become associated more and too narrowly, in my opinion, with paranormal movements and breaking of objects. I am appealing for a wide range of cases to be examined and analyzed together.

#### DISCUSSION

In each of these three cases the principal subject and/or the informants attribute the physical phenomena to a discarnate person and not to the agency of a living subject. In two of these cases apparitional experiences occurred and these were to some extent collective in the case of Sisir Kumar. Parapsychologists who favor the hypothesis of living agency (or normal causal factors) are likely to attribute apparitional experiences associated with poltergeist effects to secondary elaboration. Lambert (8) describes such apparitional experiences as possibly subjective and points out that they usually occur *after* the raps, movement of objects, etc., have been going on for some time, and that such visual experiences are usually individual and not collective. Yet some poltergeist cases include collective visual or apparitional experiences as in Case 1 of this article.

The argument that visual phenomena accompanying poltergeist activity are secondary elaborations influenced by expectations may apply equally to apparent mediumistic communications associated with them as in the cases of Sisir Kumar (Case 1) and Fanny

Roberts (Case 3). We may similarly dismiss Radhika's (Case 2) instructions to the discarnate spirit claimed as the source of her paranormal powers as merely parts of a dramatic script intended to persuade other persons, and perhaps Radhika herself, that she really had a discarnate spirit assisting her. Thus all claims to visual or auditory communications to and from discarnate spirits may harmonize with a spirit hypothesis without adding any evidence for it. It is also thus possible to explain, or explain away, many of the phenomena associated with poltergeists that may point towards a discarnate agency. By doing this too eagerly, however, we may miss an opportunity to penetrate more deeply and thus discriminate different types of experience.

It seems imprudent also to reject summarily all visual or auditory experiences when they are associated with physical disturbances when we might take the same phenomena more seriously if they came to us alone and without the associated physical effects.

Sometimes there occur physical phenomena during poltergeist disturbances which we can only with difficulty ascribe to living human agency, even when equipped with important paranormal powers. I refer to those cases in which an object is observed flying through the air and suddenly changes its speed or trajectory. Sometimes the objects turn at a sharp angle to continue flight in a new direction. On other occasions they are reported to show abrupt variations in the speed of flight. They seem to hurtle through the air, then suddenly to float to a gentle rest (Case 2 of this article belongs to this group). Cases of this sort<sup>11</sup> may be disposed of, but I think often only with some strain, by supposing the reporters of these effects all to have been hallucinating. If it be granted that the observers have not all hallucinated, then I think such cases suggest some discarnate agency actually carrying the objects transported or somehow otherwise controlling their flight. I have not myself been able to imagine how such effects could be produced solely by the unconscious mind of the living agent.

Let us therefore try to remain aware of the possibility that some poltergeist effects are in fact caused by discarnate personalities. The *modus operandi* for the kinetic effects of such discarnate agents might be different from that of living poltergeist agents. The existence of important differences might become manifest in analyses of the characteristics of large numbers of cases studied with minds open to the possibility of discarnate influence as a factor in some, but not necessarily all.

<sup>11</sup> Readers interested in accounts of these unusual, but important cases will find examples in Thurston (19, p. 149-151), Carrington and Fodor (3, p. 99), and Heinisch (cited in Owen, 13, p. 97). See also the discussion of this topic in Owen (13, pp. 124-125).



Thinking along this line, we may try to imagine how a discarnate poltergeist agent might differ in his conduct and powers from a living one. In what respects, we should ask ourselves, would his capacities, motives, and manifestations differ from those of the living poltergeist agent? I have presented my conjectures about these differences in Table 1. The reader studying this table should remember that other items not included in this list may prove more discriminating than any of those I have included in it. Also, as in most such analyses, a discrimination will be more likely to come from a syndrome of several or many items occurring together rather than from one or two items only.

Table 1

ITEMS FOR A PROPOSED PATTERN ANALYSIS OF POLTERGEIST CASES  
THAT MAY DISCRIMINATE LIVING AND DISCARNATE AGENTS

<i>Feature of Case</i>	<i>Living Agent</i>	<i>Discarnate Agent</i>
1. Types of objects moved.	Mostly light objects.	Heavier objects, e.g., stones and bricks.
2. Range of distance over which objects are moved.	Shorter range. (A few inches to 15 feet.)	Longer range. (Average perhaps 30-50 feet.)
3. Flight paths.	Simple trajectories.	Complicated trajectories with sharp angle turns, deflections, and marked changes of speed.
4. Damage to the objects moved.	Breakage common.	Objects rarely or never broken.
5. Landing patterns.	Objects seem to fall or to be knocked over. They land forcefully.	Objects seem to be carried and deposited gently.
6. Apparent motive for movement of objects.	Motiveless movement of objects; objects knocked over in a seemingly random fashion.	Movements suggest purpose, e.g., throwing a brick at someone.*
7. Benefit to subject.	Subject may express his destructive impulses toward other persons by the effects produced.	Subject may be the object of destructive impulses or exploitation. There is no benefit to him from the phenomena and actually perhaps some disadvantage or injury.
8. Significance of raps or other noises.	No meaningful communication by raps.	Meaningful responses obtained from raps.

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Feature of Case</i>	<i>Living Agent</i>	<i>Discarnate Agent</i>
9. Apparitional and visual phenomena.	Absent or occurring later and not collective.	Occurring early, abundantly, and collectively.
10. Mediumistic trances and auditory communications from apparent discarnate personalities.	Absent.	Present.
11. Location of phenomena.	Localized around a particular person.	May be localized around a person or a place.
12. Age of subject.	Usually under 20 years.	No characteristic age.
13. Resolution of physical disturbances.	With psychotherapy of the subject.	Intercession, placation, exorcism, or other activity directed toward the presumed discarnate agent.

\* This may seem inconsistent with Item 5 suggesting gentle movements. But both types of movement may occur in different cases or even in the same case at different times. The point of emphasis is the *purposiveness* apparent in the movement of objects from one place to another. The distinction is brought out by the difference between the words "knock over" or "knock down" and the words "transfer," "transport," or "place."

The differences between the main physical effects of the two types of agencies that I envisage might be summed up by comparing the movements of objects brought about by a tornado with those produced by a pneumatic tube system such as is used for carrying messages from one part of a hospital or department store to another. The tornado consists of a vortex of rapidly moving air that affects all movable objects within its path according to their weight, strength, and attachment. Apart from these physical properties of the objects, the tornado does not discriminate between objects. It may as easily move a chair as a table if both are in its path and of equal weight, strength, and attachment to contiguous objects. Chair and table may be both knocked over or put into flight. In a pneumatic tube system, however, currents of air are channeled in tubes and used to move an object (the traveling cylinder) purposefully and with a correct, undamaging amount of force just sufficient to bring the cylinder to one destination and no other. The pneumatic tube delivers a cylinder to a particular place at a particular time for a particular reason. In the same way a discarnate spirit could be expected to act differently on, say, a chair or a table according to the meaning of each to him. He

might remove a chair just as a person he disliked was about to sit down on it.<sup>12</sup> Or he might tip over a table if it had just been set for dinner so that all the plates would crash. I cannot say, of course, that a living agent could not discriminate objects in this way, but it seems to me less likely. However, we need to settle the question by further investigation rather than by assertions based on expectations.

If we were to analyze a large number of cases to look for patterns, including the items I have listed in Table I and others to be added, we might find that the cases would divide broadly into two (or more) large groups which, with regard to the physical disturbances, would correspond to the effects of the tornado and the pneumatic tube. And if it should further happen that there was a much higher incidence of apparitional experiences (especially of the collective type), of mediumistic communications, and of resolutions of the disturbances through intercessory or placatory measures in the group with "pneumatic tube" physical effects than in the group with "tornado-like" effects, then I should believe that we had improved the evidence for discarnate agents as factors in at least some poltergeist cases.

Having now raised this possibility, I have challenged myself to say how we could or should modify our research to bring into its purview (and into my recommended analysis) more cases that prima facie suggest discarnate agency. For this I recommend first of all more research workers in our field so that we can investigate more quickly all kinds of cases. I think also we should have more investigators in cultures where survival has retained respectability as a belief. It is possible that the decline in the belief in survival after death among Western people has led to a greater tendency to hide cases suggestive of discarnate agency than cases in which no "spirit" seems to be in question. India and most other Asian countries have escaped fairly well from such suppressive influences. And finally, I think we should examine whenever we can physical phenomena taking place in the presence of trance mediums. Apart from "recognized" physical mediums such as Eusapia Palladino, important physical phenomena seem to occur at least sometimes with mental mediums. The Icelandic medium, Indridi Indridason, seems a good example of this type (5). With trance mediums the presence of discarnate spirits is usually a reasonable working hypothesis, at least initially.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of a chair snatched from under a person about to sit on it, the snatcher apparently being a malevolent mediumistic communicator, see Hannesson (5, p. 253). And for another example of chairs apparently knocked over deliberately (and paranormally), ostensibly by a discarnate spirit, see the report of the Dariex case by Myers (10, pp. 193-198).

If we can in these ways widen and also deepen our study of cases falling into the general group of poltergeists, we may find that the answer to the question posed in the title of this paper is: "Neither always. Some poltergeists are living and others are dead."

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