

A REPLY TO COUNT PEROVSKY-PETROVO-SOLOVOVO.

BY DR. E. MATTIESEN.

IN the November issue (1928) of this *Journal* Count Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo has brought forward some criticisms against a series of articles which the present writer had published in the *Zeitschrift für psychische Forschung* between March 1927 and June 1928. In those articles I have been trying to introduce a new line of argument in favour of the participation, in the drama of trance-communication, of real and independent entities outside the medium's "subconsciousness," by exhibiting, from the records of trance-sittings collected by the S.P.R., instances of realistic faithfulness in sustaining rôles; of the lifelike distribution of knowledge among trance-personalities; of the purposeful and aggressive insistence of would-be communicators; of personal reactions between the various actors on the trance-stage; of their critical deportment towards each other; of discrepancies of thought between them, including cases of misunderstanding and "mis-hearing"; of lifelike dramatic *intermezzi*, offering the appearance of a genuine plurality of participators; of difficulties attending the process of communication, not referable to the act of subconscious utterance as such,—and so forth. Now into the essence of these arguments, which have been received by competent psychical researchers (Prof. Driesch among them) as a valuable contribution towards the scientific establishment of the spiritistic hypothesis, my critic does not enter in the least, hoping apparently to dispose of the whole structure of my arguments and conclusions by *discrediting the material* on which it is based. My investigations, he avers, have "but the appearance of science," since "they presuppose throughout the medium's *bona fides*" and "assume the genuineness of [trance-]utterances" (p. 364). But in doing this they move on "precarious ground," to prove which my critic instances the doubts cast at some time on Mrs. Thompson's honesty by Dr. Hodgson (*Proc.* vol. xvii, p. 138 *sqq.*). Now it is true that Dr. Hodgson, after having attended but six sittings with Mrs. Thompson, *suspected* (but never proved!) her giving out to her sitter information normally, and even surreptitiously, acquired. But then he denied Mrs. Thompson's ever having gone into trance during those sittings (*op. cit.* pp. 139, 143), while,

apart from him, no one of those who investigated her phenomena ever doubted the genuineness of her trances in general. In fact, as Count Perovsky undoubtedly knows, the very volume just quoted contains papers by Sir Oliver Lodge, Mr. Myers, Dr. van Eeden, Mr. "Wilson" and Mrs. Verrall, who all of one accord declare themselves in favour of the genuineness of the Thompson trances, the supernormality of much of the knowledge shown in them, and even, in part, the plausibility of a spiritistic interpretation of certain incidents (see *Proc.* vol. xvii, pp. 66, 73, 81 *sqq.*, 130 *sqq.*, 136, 217 *sqq.*); and in the following vol. (xviii) of the *Proceedings* Mr. Piddington published a most valuable and painstaking examination of Mrs. Thompson's trance-phenomena as a whole, after which there could not, in any unprejudiced reader's mind, remain the shadow of a doubt with regard to their genuineness and, to a great extent, supernormality. Nor does even Count Perovsky altogether ignore the *pro's* in Mrs. Thompson's case (p. 365); he merely insists that, "grave doubts—*whether rightly or wrongly*—" as to a trance-medium repeatedly quoted by me having once been uttered, I should not have passed over those suspicions in silence. I surely think, on the contrary, that, being convinced, from a *comprehensive* study of the case, that Dr. Hodgson's doubts had been superseded, I was justified in using the best of her trance records as material for my analytical study. At any rate, to say that here I was moving on "utterly precarious ground," shows a degree of favouring negative witnesses, of which I may leave it to my readers to form their own opinion. However, be that as it may: *assuming even* that the Thompson records had justly and completely been ruled out of court, I maintain that this would not noticeably weaken the fabric of my arguments. I have, in the course of my articles, referred to Mrs. Thompson—if I may trust a cursory counting—just 22 times; I have not quoted her at all under several of my headings, and but once and but incidentally under some others. Against this stands the fact of my articles containing 83 references to Mrs. Piper, 102 to Mrs. Leonard, 39 to Mrs. Verrall, and about a dozen to Mrs. "King," Mrs. Salter, Mrs. "Holland" and various other sensitives. I feel certain that in view of these figures any depreciation of my quotations from the Thompson records, *if* it were to be admitted, might be suffered to drop out of consideration. For even Count Perovsky's staunch

scepticism will hardly go the length of declaring the acts of all those sensitives to be "utterly precarious ground." If such be the case, the S.P.R. might as well give up printing trance-records at all, and psychical researchers despair of ever obtaining material for an analytical study of the deeper problems of their science.

Altogether Count Perovsky is misconceiving the trend of my thought when he complains that, while analysing the trance-utterances of professional mediums, I throughout assume "the genuineness of these utterances" (p. 364), if by "genuineness" he means their partly supernormal character, not to speak of their possible origin in the mind of any departed. What I am solely assuming is the genuineness of *the trance-state* (or the automatic nature of utterances respectively) an unassailable assumption in practically every case I have made use of; for almost exclusively by analysing the dramatic *forms* of such utterances have I been trying to prove the participation in them of more than one independent entity,—quite regardless of the *contents* of such utterances, which, of course, form the usual basis for ascribing to them any supernormal origin. It is, then, the validity of my conclusions drawn from such analysis which ought to be either admitted or else criticized; yet as to that validity my critic has not said one word.

Count Perovsky equally falls into error when from the general depreciation of my materials he passes on to criticizing individual instances. In my analysis of the White Case I had, *inter alia*, described the curious scene during a Leonard sitting shortly after Mrs. White's death, when "Fedá" alone seemed totally unable to grasp the fact that her former client had "passed over," while the sitter (Miss Nea Walker) *and* the communicator ("Mr. White") were, of course, aware of it and used expressions about it which might have enlightened, but ended by "completely bamboozling," the control. "Dr. Mattiesen," says the Count, "assumes without further ado that Fedá 'naturally' knew nothing of the death, and after an exhaustive discussion of the incidents of the sitting based on so strange an assumption, observes that another instance more conclusive of the spirit hypothesis could hardly have been quoted. Poor hypothesis indeed if unsupported by better evidence!" (p. 365). Poor, indeed, if no better evidence be available than my critic fondly imagines the present one to be. As a matter of fact, I did not make the above

assumption "without further ado," but on the explicit testimony of Miss Walker, author of *The Bridge*, who tells us (p. 260) that "Mrs. Leonard had never known Mrs. White's name or address, so that newspaper notices would not inform her of the death, supposing she saw any. And she was not told of it in any other way." But then, *assuming* even that Mrs. Leonard, and therefore "Feda," *might* have become aware of the death by normal or any other means, we should still have to *weigh* the lifelike "naturalness" of the trance-scene against the possibility and likelihood of Feda's creating such a wonderful piece of "comedy" and make-believe, instead of parading her knowledge of the death as a cheap means of proving insight into the happenings of the beyond. I challenge readers to study the record of the sitting in question (*The Bridge*, p. 262 ff.) and then ask themselves whether they do not find in "Feda's" exclusive and obvious ignorance of what everybody else knows—conclusive proof of the independence, in this case, of communicator and control.

Here is another sample of the Count's "critical methods" as applied to individual instances: I had been arguing that "acoustic mishearing" of the communicator by the control contributed one proof, amongst others, of their mutual independence. Count P. attempts (on p. 365 sq.) to invalidate *one* of the instances given for this, viz. the apparent mistaking of "Hodgson" for "Hogman" on the part of "Rector," by declaring it a possible "piece of refined comedy"—thus turning into a criticism an admission made by myself. He does not tell his readers that I had given *six* instances in all of this special sort of occurrences, which it would be difficult to stamp, all of them, as pieces of comedy. And even *were* we to admit a bare *possibility* of doing so in most cases taken singly—does not Count Perovsky admit that it is often by the *accumulation* of stray hints that the weight of an explanation is increased until it well-nigh amounts to certainty, just as it is the *convergence* of various forms of argument in my articles which amounts to a new kind of proof of survival?

The second *general* criticism advanced by Count Perovsky refers to the fact that in my articles I have been discussing certain *pro's*, but have "completely ignored" the *contra's* of the spiritistic explanation of trance-phenomena; a fact which is said to "deprive [my] work of scientific value," since "science is no *plaidoyer*" (366). I am rather amazed at such logic in polemics.

My articles did not pretend to constitute a comprehensive treatise on Spiritism. In them I repeatedly and emphatically proclaimed my intention to set aside, for the time, all those facts which represent difficulties in the way of a spiritistic explanation of trance-phenomena, and to limit myself to the exhibition of *just one* new line of argument in favour of it. (See p. 341 of vol. 3, *Ztschr. f. ps. F.*, as well as p. 69, referred to by Count Perovsky.) I also referred my readers, in the very same sentence, to a paper to be published at a later date, in which those difficulties were to be discussed at length and worked into a comprehensive theory of the trance-drama. What there is unpardonable in such a proceeding, or un-“scientific” (a regular word-fetish of my critic) I am at a loss to make out. Count Perovsky kindly credits me with a knowledge of “Mrs. Sidgwick’s admirable paper in vol. xv of *Proceedings*,” setting forth some of those difficulties; and I shall credit him with a knowledge of her still more admirable paper filling the whole of vol. xxviii, and far more exhaustively dealing with those difficulties. But what of that? Do Mrs. Sidgwick’s investigations preclude any further vindication of spiritistic views? Far from it, says—Count Perovsky (p. 368). And well might he be aware that even Mrs. Sidgwick, notwithstanding her surpassing acumen in expounding the mortal side of trance-mediumship, has more than once declared her willingness to admit, ultimately, a spiritistic interpretation of certain trance-phenomena. This being so, what becomes of the Count’s reproach, and by what canon of logic was I constrained to force a discussion of surmountable difficulties into an article expressly destined to extend the *positive* proofs of spiritism by just one?

After all, I should hardly have thought proper to devote so much space to the refutation of so ill-considered an attack, were it not that in replying to it I meant to meet a *class* of critics and psychical “researchers” who ought, I think, at times to be reminded to keep within bounds. I mean those “negativists” who seem to find the purpose of “scientific” work in endless fastidious cavilling at details and gnawing at the weaker points of individual “cases,” even after a genuine natural *type* of facts has long been established beyond reasonable doubt by the constant recurrence of typical details in a majority of “strong” cases. Those negativists undoubtedly serve some useful purpose in *steadying* the advance of research, yet never really contribute

towards the progress of *science*, which essentially aims at the establishment of a rational *synthesis* and *comprehension* of facts. Their resolute "will to disbelieve" condemns them to sterility, notwithstanding their perpetual talk of "scientific standards" and "critical methods," and their names will most likely be forgotten¹ when the history of the science of metapsychics, *i.e.* of those synthetic conceptions, which constitute its framework, shall come to be written.

[This article was received in December, but was held over for lack of space. We have also received from Miss Nea Walker, the author of "The Bridge," a letter dealing with that part of Count Solovovo's article which involves her own work, in much the same terms as Dr. Mattiesen.—*Ed.*]

REVIEW.

Psychical Science and Religious Belief. By J. ARTHUR HILL.
Rider and Co., London. 5s. net.

Another book by Mr. J. Arthur Hill is sure to be welcomed. His new work has the qualities which have characterised his former writings, *plus*, a closer unity of conception, which gives it additional interest from a literary standpoint. He has always shown a full consciousness of the importance of well-attested facts. Whilst recognizing that many things may be true which cannot be proved to be so, he never bases his convictions on anything short of good evidence; moreover, he reviews both the facts and the conclusions to which they have led him in a "dry light." Of no one can it be asserted that he is wholly without bias of any kind, but certainly Mr. Hill cannot be accused of a bias in favour of credulity. It is the impact of facts of experience which have compelled him, as a logical and honest thinker, to the complete change of attitude which he has made during the last twenty-five years.

In his last book, in addition to the re-statement of some of the results of psychical research, which have appeared in our *Proceedings* and elsewhere, he has added further experiences which

¹I confess to looking forward to such a prospect with undisguised cheerfulness. And as the same destiny is, I fear, likely to overtake Dr. Mattiesen, may I express the hope that his serenity in this respect will be in no way inferior to my own.—P.-P.-S.