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Did the Cross Correspondences Prove Immortality?

Mysteries are not necessarily miracles.

—GOETHE, *SPRUCHE IN PROSA*

Magicians have scored bulls-eyes in targeting the trickery of such heralded psychics as Henry Slade, Margery, William Roy, Eusapia Paladino and Uri Geller. Published volumes by conjurers have exposed purveyors of spurious physical phenomena designed to demonstrate psi powers or survival after death but actually based upon conjuring methods.

Conjurers have neglected, however, the most convincing, prolonged and influential case (in upper class circles of the intelligentsia) in the history of psychic studies. It lacked the drama of floating trumpets, ectoplasmic productions and spoon bending. But its ingenuity, seeming safeguards and impeccable participants convinced untold numbers of skeptics that at last incontrovertible proof of continuing life after organic death had been achieved.

After several years research into this incredible case, I wish to reveal my reasons for believing that the famed *Cross Correspondences*, as the episode is called, are explainable in normal psychological terms. Without some of the key automatists indulging in trickery or conscious fraud the impressive events may still have taken place without any relevance to discarnate spirits at work.



Dr. F. W. H. Myers, noted author, psychic investigator and a central figure in the Cross Correspondences.

The phenomena lasted thirty years starting in 1901 and fading away in 1932. During that time seven well known “spirit” personalities, including primarily three scholarly founders of England’s prestigious SPR, or Society for Psychical Research (Edmund Gurney, Professor Henry Sidgwick and Dr. F. W. H. Myers), seemingly transmitted messages from across the grave to at least twelve separate spirit mediums living in England, the United States of America and India.

The mediums included the noted American psychic, Mrs. Leonore Piper; a sister of Rudyard Kipling living in India, Mrs. Fleming (a.k.a. Mrs. Holland); and Mrs. A. W. Verrall, an instructor at Newnham College, Cambridge University, in England. All were amateur psychics except Piper. They, and others involved, tended to be of the intelligentsia, socially high in standing and sometimes wealthy. Pseudonyms were occasionally adopted by non-professional psychics to avoid the derision with which believers and practitioners were frequently confronted.

The messages from the “dead” usually were received by automatic writing, a pen held in the psychic’s hand scribbling on a pad under spirit motivation without conscious control by the living. Over 3000 scripts were thus produced across three decades and filled more than 3000 pages when published for wider examination in the *SPR Proceedings* between 1906 and 1938.

A strange factor in the scripts made them mind jolting. Messages received by any single medium seemed aimless. But when an impartial investigator fitted them together, like parts of a jigsaw puzzle, with scripts received by other automatists whom the first medium might not even know, meanings began to emerge. Unlike the sophomoric yieldings of most seance situations, these privately received messages were redolent of Greek or Latin phrases, classical poetry, literary symbols and esoteric references characteristic of the cultural usages of the deceased SPR founders and others.

Hypothetically, the aim of the discarnates in the beyond, who had themselves been psychic researchers while in the flesh, was to provide a demonstrable form of communication from the spirit realm that would convincingly and absolutely rule out causative factors of fraud or telepathy. The deceased Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick had devised this ingenious method of identifying themselves, and proving spirit contact, by sending fragments of messages to separate living automatists none of whom knew, until outside researchers checked their scripts, where they were all heading.

Writings received in one session of spirit contact in England might have thoughts, words or references that corresponded with words in a message obtained by the psychic in India only hours later. These parallel phrasings and inter-related references in the scripts, from which meanings grew, has led to the drawn out experiment being called the Cross Correspondences in the history of parapsychology. Curiously, the self-contained corresponding phrases and high classical tone of the scripts dried up in 1924 although straightforward messages came through for another eight years.

The late Dr. Gardner Murphy, Columbia professor and president of both the American Psychological Association and the American Society for Psychical Research, cited three possible non-supernatural hypotheses for the phenomena circulating in psi quarters. First: The messages could actually be produced by telepathy between the living. Experiments by Dr. Joseph B. Rhine and others, however, tend to indicate that such precise and constant E.S.P., clairvoyance or telepathy, even if such powers exist, does not happen. Second: The messages were a result of "snooping" and fraud. I intend to explain why fraud may be too strong an evaluation and how snooping might be rationalized away by the medium. Third: The sensitives were drawing upon a cosmic reservoir of knowledge. By this I assume that some skeptics of supernaturalism wonder if perhaps the coincidences and correspondences could be a product of what Carl Jung has called acausal synchronicity. If none of these natural explanations fit, the final conclusion must or could be that the automatists were actually under the influence of the discarnates and thus human survival and across-the-chasm communications are possible and proved.

I would like to analyze this complex and impressive monument to psychic dreams from a viewpoint, that of a conjuring psychologist, apparently not assumed before. In spite of the case's convincing nature, I feel that a rational, non-psychic explanation is more feasible than those based upon supernormal or spirit continuance concepts.

Supporters of the survival thesis maintain that enough mediums of high ethical character were involved over so long a period of time in the Cross Correspondences that the corruptive utilization of collusion among themselves may well be ruled out. I tend to agree in this instance although social and academic standing does not always guarantee integrity. The conspiracy theory may be rejected because the sensitives did not receive the automatic writings as a group from the beginning nor did they all necessarily know one another.

The first messages were mailed in 1901 to the SPR in London by the classical scholar, Mrs. A. W. Verrall, from Cambridge, England. One year later, the distinguished medium, Mrs. L. E. Piper, in Boston, Massachusetts, notified the SPR that she had received some automatic writings. In another twelve months, Mrs. Verrall's daughter, Helen, the only other scholar with classical training, followed. In 1903, Mrs. Alice Fleming, living in India, began receiving messages from the dead psychic researchers. Other starting dates: Mrs. Coombe-Tennant (a.k.a. Mrs. Willett), one-time British delegate to the Assembly of the League of Nations—1908; Dame Edith Lyttelton—1913; Mrs. Stuart Wilson—1915. Lesser-known mediums participated at divers times.

How does one explain away the large number of specialists in automatic writing who became involved? Within psychic circles the case became a famous puzzler. It was an attractive challenge. The spectacle of bandwagon hopping is not rare among psychics. It occurred, though for shorter periods, following the deaths of Harry Houdini, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Bishop James Pike and Arthur Ford. When one psychic allegedly receives a newly deceased celebrity's communication it may spark a spreading flame.

Such associations generate news, if publicity be desirable. This motive apparently was not operative in the Cross Correspondences. Participants were of a social class which would have reacted with ridicule. Rather could it have been something more genteel and subtle. People hunger for peer respect and admiration. Within appropriate inner ranks, psychics may be nourished by the knowledge that through certain claimed psi experience their identity has been strengthened and noticed by researchers and sensitives alike. Mediums would be tempted to "get into the act" through having learned about the automatic transmissions via SPR publications, correspondence and gossip.

If the spirit communications were not genuine, how explain why they continued on for so many years without being exposed or becoming tiresome and burdensome to the participating mediums? The original communicator,

Mrs. Verrall, died in 1916. Various sensitives moved in and out with their "spirit-devised" scripts. The enterprise was self-sustaining in its fascination and for its leisurely pace. Weighing down no single sensitive, it continued on like a quietly exciting hobby, even a prestigious, in-group activity for those involved. Had there been intrigue, someone ultimately would have confessed, if only privately. Thus do most group hoaxes end.

Does not the abundance of scholarly correspondences in the messages, and the apparent cross references, prove that mediums untutored in the classics or even working together could not have fraudulently produced the messages out of their own minds? In reply, we must emphasize the studious research frequently found behind the better psychics' work. They are not fools. How easily mislead are those commentators who judge that spirit messages sometimes display a knowledge transcending or foreign to that possessed by the sensitives concerned.

The surface personality of many people, including so-called psychics, often belies what dwells in the depths below. Underneath a socially adapted facade may lurk a mischievous seriousness. Who knows when one is facing, in that unprepossessing exterior, a latent novelist, philosopher or psychologist? As in everything else, it is presumptuous in psi to dogmatize about any person's presumed lack of knowledge, natural inclinations or level of intelligence. We need only recall the chasm that Emerson discovered between the mundane Carlyle whom he met and the brilliant Carlyle whom he had read. Who really knows with what skills and interests a person studies and thinks in private?

Believing that they possessed supernormal gifts, numerous individuals were inspired to assay automatic communication with pad and pen after reading F. W. H. Myers' enormously influential book *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (posthumously published in 1903). Indeed, this admittedly brought Mrs. Fleming into the case. And perusing reports about her scripts led to the involvement of Mrs. Coombe-Tennant.

The style of messages required in order to become part of this venture was obvious. Widely known were the scholarly interests, literary forms and word usages of Messrs. Gurney, Sidgwick and Myers. Conforming to such expectations, the classical specialist, Mrs. Verrall, set the tone of the transmissions from the start. Naturally, other sensitives were thereafter motivated to delve into and become familiar with related works of mythology, technical phrases, poetry, Latin and Greek writings. These materials are readily accessible in the libraries of the world.

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Could similar and detailed classical allusions in different scripts have been a result of information being conveyed telepathically from one automatist to another? I discard this theory, as previously mentioned, because the limitations of this alleged power are well recognized. However, such alternative possibilities, as remote as they may be, do indicate that the cross correspondence concept does not offer a watertight or fraud-proof system to demonstrate self-aware existence after death. Those connected with the case erred in so believing.

Incomplete and meaningless scripts are exactly the result one might expect from quick learning automatists sitting alone with pencil and paper trying to "receive" (recollect) unfamiliar classical passages. Recently memorized or read, difficult-to-recall materials are more easily handled in fragments. What was now being wrung out of the conscious or unconscious memory they may have honestly come to believe was surging from spirit entities—and that their own literary research was not consciously undertaken to produce this information but to be able to understand or record properly whatever strange and foreign words should present themselves psychically. Thus sincere persons might become self-deluded by what, on their own part, was actually an "unconscious" fabrication of messages.

Limited cooperation among two or more sensitives may also have developed at one point or another. What would be more natural than for one automatist to write casually, and at first innocently, in a social letter to another: "Yesterday, Myers came through to me quoting, oddly, from Browning and suggesting anagrams. What peculiar stuff!" Would it be surprising if the recipient of this "offhand" comment did not find herself receiving comparable messages the next day?

A thin line separates the rationalization that one is simply comparing notes or making an idle observation, from a conscious desire to plant a suggestion that would be acted upon by another. Is it reasonable to suppose that the Verralls, mother and daughter, refrained from all conversation or correspondence with one another about the esoteric and obscure materials each was theoretically encountering. We know that they did exchange viewpoints.

At first, the messages were so bewildering and sometimes "dead-endish" that, after a time, it was evident that some rationale for their shortcomings had to be sought by the living SPR researchers. Compiling and studying the scripts as they arrived in their hands from the scattered automatists,

their perplexity was understandable. In a moment of brilliant insight, someone decided or caused the alleged spirits of the dead SPR founders to declare that this was a deliberate technique of their own (the deceased) devising. It was an instrument by which to prove their survival and identity, embracing several independent channels of communication. By issuing various inter-related, recondite statements which even the recipients could not sort out alone, they could prove their messages were genuine. The explanation was a master *tour de force*.

It may be that, among the dozen or so participating mediums, some less conscientious, self-invited individuals may have latched onto an opportunity (the Cross Correspondences) for which they possessed few appropriate talents and were clearly cheating. On the other hand, across 30 years some seemingly amazing material would inevitably show up in the scripts. According to the law of averages, corresponding literary and language content would occur, sometimes expectedly, sometimes accidentally. On other occasions they could have been the result of information transfers between those mediums who did write one another though they may never have met. The SPR itself had laid firm stress on the importance of the discovered cross allusions for increasing the script's psychic credibility. This established goals for which any discerning automatist would consciously strive.

The interpretations even some impartial SPR investigators placed upon cryptic materials in the thousands of automatic writings demonstrate how readily human beings can adapt evidence to fit understandable hopes or expected conclusions. Alleged connections pointed out in some words and phrases occurring in different scripts of the Cross Correspondences were often farfetched and strain one's credibility.

The very ambiguity of so many of these spirit communications brings echoes in our mind of Nostradamus' and Mother Shipton's prophecies, imaginative ramblings into which, as in the Judeo-Christian Bible, one can read whatever one's prejudices or anticipations incline one to find. With such an endless quantity of composed writings, the believer can readily pick out dozens of items and ask "How do you explain this?" I am confident that all such queries can be interpreted in normal terms through one or another of the process judgments I have suggested.

We might inquire: is this any way for scientifically minded scholars, dead or alive, to try and prove an existence beyond the grave? If one wishes to convince, one does not deal in frail perplexities subject to such debatable interpretations. Ambiguity is often a sign of confusion and obfuscation, the

tactic of fortune tellers and astrologers who must keep open all avenues of retreat. Is this a case of spooks playing games with the living? Or do the living play games with the living?

Today, serious survival research conducted by Ian Stevenson, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and others concentrates heavily on the dying, analyzing death-bed recollections and experiences. What is the afterlife significance of apparitions perceived by those near death? Another approach involves such notable psychics as Ingo Swann and Alex Tanous in carefully supervised out-of-body experiments. Is there some aspect of the personality, often called the soul, which can exist independent of the physical body? If there is, then the disintegration of the flesh need not mean the extinction of the soul. These represent two of the better survival investigation methods pursued near the close of the 20th century as contrasted with the Cross Correspondences which were perhaps the best or most influentially convincing at the century's start.

We are confronted, in all of life, with the unhappy realization that truth can be mistaken for falsehood just as often as fraud can pose as legitimacy. In demonstrating how fallacious the Cross Correspondences can be, we still must allow an outside chance that although analysis may seem to strip them of evidential value we could be wrong in absolutely rejecting them. Positive determinations in this complex world may be dangerous.

No one may ever confirm positively whether these psychic messages were deliberately interwoven with internal experiments by spirit entities to document their legitimacy. Or whether they were begun as accidental, or even planned, coincidences in the mediums' own scripts and references. But believers cannot now claim that the Cross Correspondences phenomena, in their many developments, are without a rational, credible, natural interpretation.

Without conscious fraud or provable collaboration, a number of insightful individuals could produce parallel or interlocking results by normal means. Whether conscious or unconscious chicanery did occur on the part of one or more of those who fashioned the voluminous scripts may always be open to debate. But discussed the case should be, for no one can measure the numbers of persons whose religious and philosophical beliefs about an after life were radically altered because of this famous and impressive case.

I must agree with the distinguished British researcher into psi phenomena, Mrs. Rosalind Heywood, when she wrote of the SPR investigators of this phenomena: "They could only say: I believe. They could not say: I know."