

THE KERN CITY POLTERGEIST: A CASE SEVERELY STRAINING THE LIVING AGENT HYPOTHESIS

by L. STAFFORD BETTY

ABSTRACT

Poltergeist activity of a striking kind was observed at a house in Bakersfield, California, between December 1981 and January 1982 coinciding with the owner's first two months of occupancy. It virtually ceased following a kind of exorcism carried out by two 'sensitives' in January 1982. The criteria introduced by Stevenson (1972) for conformity to the deceased agent hypothesis fits the case well; furthermore certain unusual features of the case point with force to a specific deceased person as agent, namely the previous owner of the house. The deceased agent and living agent hypotheses are discussed with respect to the law of parsimony and, in a postscript, a case is made for preferring the deceased agent hypothesis for poltergeist cases in general.

INTRODUCTION

Poltergeist research has come a long way since Podmore (1896) investigated eleven outbreaks centering on adolescent children, found evidence of trickery in several of them, and concluded that trickery was the overwhelmingly probable explanation of them all. In subsequent decades psychical researchers learned that many poltergeists required a paranormal explanation, and parapsychologists accordingly produced the RS (recurrent spontaneous) PK hypothesis: poltergeists were spontaneous PK outbursts unconsciously generated by a frustrated, repressed person, usually an adolescent. Nowadays we place less than complete confidence in this still very respectable hypothesis; for we are turning up many cases which do not center on adolescents, and more importantly, some which center on no identifiable living agent at all. As a result, the age-old discarnate entity hypothesis and the related deceased person hypothesis are today making something of a comeback. In a painstaking analysis of an ongoing case in New Jersey, Osis and McCormick (1982) showed why the living agent hypothesis failed to account for the phenomena and presented data which strongly suggest an identifiable deceased person as the poltergeist.

The case investigated here strikingly meets several of the criteria proposed by Stevenson (1972) and by Gauld and Cornell (1979) for conformity to the discarnate entity hypothesis. In general outline this case resembles the New Jersey case of Osis and McCormick, yet certain features, including a successful 'rational exorcism' by two sensitives, might give it more 'clout' to many a reader. In any event, the living agent hypothesis is severely strained to accommodate the phenomena described here. We will be forced to look elsewhere.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING OF THE CASE

On January 27, 1982, a certain Paula Calvin called me and explained that a friend of hers was 'in trouble'. She described what appeared to me a rather typical poltergeist outbreak (though she did not use the word) and asked me to help. I immediately called the 'victim', a certain Frances Freeborn. Frances, sixty-three years old, turned out to be a wealthy, prominent, civic-minded widow and the executive director of an important non-profit organization in town. I

937 8984

pose is to
irit those
e on any
ould be
ion to the
y's field of
hers. **The**
xpressed

l.Eng.

A.
Psych.

e

would later learn that she did not drink, had never used drugs or smoked pot, and was not on medication. She had every reason to be embarrassed about what was happening to her, and told me so. She was somewhat impatient with my theories and only wanted to know if I could help 'get rid of it, whatever it is'. At wit's end, but desiring to help, I called a friend, Ava Jacobs, a sensitive. Ava, her fifteen year old daughter Jennie (also sensitive), and I converged on Frances' house that afternoon.

Frances' white single-story three-bedroom home is an attractively furnished, comfortable, but unpretentious dwelling in an upper middle class retirement community known as Kern City. As you walk through the front door and stand in the living room, you might first notice the green expanse of a golf course through the sliding glass doors behind the dining room table. Off to the left is a hallway leading to the three bedrooms. Straight ahead is the kitchen, off to the right sharing a wall with the living room is the garage, and behind the garage looking out onto the golf course is the study. Even though the houses are built fairly close to each other, the neighborhood is quiet. Frances' most obvious neighbors are rabbits in her backyard which her dog, Missie, a Yorkshire terrier, sometimes barks at. Frances had been living in the house for only two months when I arrived on the scene.

The other leading figure in this story (apparently) is Mrs Margaret ("Meg") Lyons (pseudonym). Meg lived in this house since 1962, when it was built. Her husband died a few months after moving in. In the late sixties she married Bradley S. Lyons (pseudonym) who is still alive. Meg was a career woman with the Girl Scouts and is remembered by her son-in-law, Luke Cowley (pseudonym) whom I have interviewed extensively, as 'a dominating woman in a completely subtle way, very autonomous'. Luke, who was close to his mother-in-law, describes her as 'clever, incredibly successful, great in groups, enjoying attention, always the focal point, extremely vibrant, scintillating, strong, very beautiful, the pocket-Venus type, stubborn as hell, tiny, only 4'11". In answer to questions I directed to him, Luke answered that Meg loved life, never discussed religious issues, had an 'extremely formalized' religion, and was not ready to die when death came quickly and unexpectedly at the age of seventy-four. She loved the house; Luke remembers how visitors would sometimes exclaim, 'This house is Meg!' She had always wanted her daughter, Johnella Cowley (pseudonym), Luke's wife, to live in it someday.

Meg died in December 1976. A few months later her widower, Bradley, moved out, and Luke, always hoping that Johnella would change her mind and consent to move to Bakersfield from their home in Petaluma, looked after the house intermittently for the next four and a half years. Once every three weeks or so he would drive down from Petaluma and spend three days to a week in the house; usually he would come by himself, but on rare occasions his two sons or Johnella would accompany him. Once in 1979 Johnella spent three weeks in the house by herself. Until Frances moved in on November 30, 1981, the house had no steady tenant.

CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE INVESTIGATION

My initial visit to Frances' house was undertaken out of a desire to help. I had no intention at the time of writing up a report, for nothing about the case struck

me as especially part of the explanation sensitive; n impressions time she th she had nev her friend P parapsycho upon hersel Paula not c Paula's hus fortuitous c Trickery or of the quest

In the ens still had no i parapsychol from France was obvious Luke for the after the hou army man, a He holds a n literature at He had he phenomena.

Frances h: they met for the business phone call to ourselves sit seven-hour i extraordinar before Franc generating fc apparent tha

CIRCUMSTANCES

For reaso Frances' mov shown the hc years earlier. place, her clo drawers. But Frances' sup throughout th where a kitch

smoked pot,
about what
ent with my
ver it is'. At
ve. Ava, her
on Frances'

y furnished,
s retirement
or and stand
golf course
o the left is a
en, off to the
d the garage
ses are built
most obvious
shire terrier,
two months

ret ("Meg")
as built. Her
she married
woman with
owley (pseu-
woman in a
close to his
at in groups,
scintillating,
y, only 4'11".
eg loved life,
ion, and was
t the age of
sitors would
er daughter,

adley, moved
l and consent
er the house
weeks or so he
in the house;
is or Johnella
the house by
had no steady

to help. I had
ie case struck

me as especially exceptional. Ava, Jennie, and I spent three hours in the house, part of the time devoted to assembling the facts and testing for normal explanations of the phenomena reported, the rest to the exorcism. I am not sensitive; neither is Frances; we merely looked on and mentally recorded our impressions of the goings-on of Ava and Jennie. Frances later told me that at the time she thought the exorcism was an 'exercise in futility'. She also confided that she had never placed much credibility in 'psychic stuff', and that when she called her friend Paula on the morning of my first visit, she had not asked for help from a parapsychologist; it was Paula, whose husband is a real estate agent, who took it upon herself to call me and urged me to call Frances and establish contact. Had Paula not called me, Frances would have put her house on the market, with Paula's husband as her agent. The upshot of all this is that only by the most fortuitous circumstances did Frances and I get together in the first place. Trickery or fraud of any kind is, for these and other reasons to be cited below, out of the question.

In the ensuing months after this first meeting, I all but forgot about the case. I still had no intention of reporting it and satisfied myself with referring to it in my parapsychology class in Spring 1982. Then, on December 9, 1982, I got a call from Frances. She did not tell me why I was to come the following morning, but it was obvious she was excited about something. It was the next day that I met Luke for the first time. Luke, you will recall, is Meg's son-in-law, and had looked after the house during its vacancy from 1977 through 1981. He is a retired career army man, an intelligent, skeptical, freethinking sort of person in his mid-sixties. He holds a master's degree in English literature and at one time taught courses in literature at Ohio State and military history at the University of San Francisco. He had heard of the Rhines and had long been curious about psychic phenomena. He has no known psychic abilities, however.

Frances had bought the house in November 1981 from Luke; it was then that they met for the first time. But their relationship was destined to continue beyond the business transaction. A week after moving in, Frances put in an emergency phone call to Luke in Petaluma. And then, a year later, the three of us found ourselves sitting together in Frances' living room. It was during this intensive seven-hour interview that I realized I had stumbled upon a case that was extraordinary. It became apparent then that the poltergeist had been active long before Frances moved in, and that therefore she was almost certainly not the generating force of the phenomena reported below. It also became increasingly apparent that the poltergeist, whatever its nature, was intelligent.

CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE MOVE

For reasons that will become clear below, the circumstances surrounding Frances' move into her new house must be reviewed. When Frances was first shown the house by her agent, it was in the condition that Meg had left it five years earlier. Her family pictures were mounted on the walls, her furniture was in place, her clothes hung in the closet, even her underwear was folded in dresser drawers. But within a week the house was completely transformed under Frances' supervision. She brought in her own furniture; she put in new carpet throughout the house; most significantly she made two changes in the kitchen: where a kitchen dinette set had been, she installed a long counter with a cabinet

of sliding drawers and hinged doors underneath. She also put in a new sink, raised the counter on either side of the sink several inches (Frances is eight inches taller than Meg was and has back problems), and replaced the worn tile of the counter with a different coloured formica. In these and many other ways Frances redefined the character of the house. Meg's blue rugs, gilt furniture, and colourful peacocks gave way to Frances' more subdued taste.

It had been nineteen months since Frances' husband had died. She had experienced the usual dislocations of acute grief while in her old house, but had not experienced anything paranormal. Her period of active grieving had long passed by the time of the move. As mentioned above, she eagerly anticipated the move; she had no regrets about leaving her old house.

THE REPORTED PHENOMENA, NOVEMBER 1981-JANUARY 1982

Poltergeist phenomena began the day Frances moved in and continued for two months. I have grouped the reported activity under fifteen headings.

(1) The actual moving of furniture was completed by about 10 p.m., November 30. The movers had just left, and Frances was sitting quietly in her new living room. Suddenly she noticed a peculiar thumping and chafing noise coming from what seemed like the kitchen. She vaguely wondered what it was, but dismissed it as either heat expansion noises (the furnace was on) or the plug knocking and dragging against the cooler on the roof (this had happened once before in her previous house). Not in the least alarmed, she prepared for bed. As planned, she shut the doors leading into the two unused bedrooms and the unused bathroom; Luke had kept the vents leading into these rooms closed in order to save on heating expense, and Frances decided to follow Luke's example; she made a point of closing the doors to these rooms.

(2) The next morning when Frances got up, she found these three doors wide open and thought to herself that there must be a draft in the house. That very day she called in a repairman, Ernest Dozier, and had him weatherstrip the front door and raise the stoop of the door leading out from the dining room into the garage. She later showed me the work that Dozier had done; he had raised the stoop approximately one-half inch. Both doors fit snugly.

(3) That first morning the sewer system backed up while Frances was showering. That same day she called in plumbers, and they dug up the yard: the system was in a state of total disintegration. Frances was very annoyed at having to spend \$600 to repair the system, for the escrow papers indicated that the house was in perfect shape. A week later, after additional problems, Frances would place a call to Luke in Petaluma and stop just short of accusing him of a breach of contract. Luke assured her (and me) that during the years he had been using the house there had never been a problem with the drains.

(4) On the day of the move (November 30) Luke offered Frances a pink vanity bench that had belonged to Meg. Frances said she would be glad to have it, and the bench was placed in front of the built-in dressing-table in the master bedroom. For the next three or four days Frances kept finding the bench pulled out; always she would push it back in under the table, only to discover that it was out and 'in the way' a little later. She was sufficiently annoyed by the bench to store it in the garage on approximately her fourth day in the house. At the time, however, it did not occur to her that there was anything especially odd about the

bench; it was how unlike frequently. learned the Bakersfield time John that Meg sentimental

(5) On the dining room But still she bird could

(6) That was bother the three a sliding door were wide cabinet were underneath the house, working not perfectly.) him to see a quizzical look the hell's hand latched the block away drawers and which hit C budge then

(7) For the doors open open. On herself before next morning she reports

(8) With motor-driven

(9) It was home, day dining room had each corner seemed to sit two more like when Frances particular day a week after complained

a new sink,
eight inches
rn tile of the
ays Frances
rniture, and

ed. She had
use, but had
ng had long
ticipated the

inued for two
gs.

ut 10 p.m.,
quietly in her
chafing noise
what it was,
t) or the plug
ppened once
d for bed. As
oms and the
oms closed in
ke's example;

re doors wide
That very day
trip the front
oom into the
ad raised the

Frances was
the yard: the
yed at having
hat the house
rances would
of a breach of
een using the

a pink vanity
o have it, and
n the master
bench pulled
er that it was
the bench to
. At the time,
odd about the

bench; it was not until she began to think in paranormal terms that she realized how unlikely it was that she herself would have left the bench pulled out so frequently. Of peripheral interest is the fact that when Luke's wife, Johnella, learned that he had given the bench away, she was upset. On his first trip to Bakersfield after Frances' move he managed to get the bench back, and at this time Johnella is using the bench in her home in Petaluma. The gist of all this is that Meg had a great attachment to the bench, and that Johnella wanted it for sentimental purposes.

(5) On her second night in the house, around 9.30, Frances was eating in the dining room when she again heard noises apparently coming from the kitchen. But still she was unsuspecting, and remembers wondering if a squirrel or even a bird could have come in through the roof vent to seek warmth.

(6) That night Frances slept on a couch in her living room because her back was bothering her. As before, she made a point of closing doors. In addition to the three aforementioned, she closed the door to the master bedroom and the sliding door leading into the kitchen. The next morning all five of these doors were wide open. Furthermore, all of the sliding drawers of the newly installed cabinet were open (but not so far as to fall out), and the cabinet doors underneath the drawers were also open. Frances called Ernest Dozier back into the house, this time to check the door latches. He assured her the latches were working normally. (I, of course, later checked them myself, and they worked perfectly.) She also called in the carpenter who had made the cabinet and asked him to see if it was level. It was exactly level. Frances remembers the carpenter's quizzical look; it was only then, for the first time, that she asked herself, 'What the hell's happening here?' Still, she dismissed it: perhaps she hadn't actually latched the doors, she thought, and vibrations from truck traffic on a highway a block away might have jostled the drawers and doors open. I later checked these drawers and doors for drag, and they were entirely normal; a strong earthquake, which hit Coalinga, ninety miles north of Bakersfield, on May 2, 1983, failed to budge them even though Bakersfield rocked and rolled.

(7) For the next two months, on arising, Frances usually found the hallway doors open, the sliding kitchen door open, and the drawers under the counter open. On several occasions she experimented, opening the doors and drawers herself before going to bed; when she did this, they would usually be closed the next morning. 'Five out of seven nights on the average something would happen', she reports.

(8) Within the first week of Frances' moving in, the chain operating the motor-driven garage door snapped.

(9) It wasn't long before the lights began acting up. When Frances came home, day or night, she found one of three lights—in the living room, in the dining room, or in the kitchen—turned on. Soon she called in an electrician and had each of the light switches replaced. The replacement of these switches seemed to solve the problem. But no sooner had this problem been solved than two more lights, one in each of the bathrooms, started to turn on by themselves when Frances was out of the house. When she replaced these switches, this particular disturbance again ceased. It was after the initial light episode—about a week after the move—that Frances called Luke in Petaluma. She tactfully complained about the light switches, the sewer, and the garage door. Luke

reports that he was more surprised than Frances, for he knew the house well and had never had any problems with the light switches, sewer, or garage door. Frances remembers Luke saying 'It's as if the house is complaining about you being there'. But there was no discussion of paranormality.

(10) Frances experienced the first violent poltergeist outbreak about two weeks after her move. She was wide awake, smoking a cigarette in the living room one afternoon, when suddenly the sliding kitchen door roared shut, and sounds came from the kitchen as if 'half a dozen people were banging around'. The sounds lasted no longer than might a rumble of thunder; when she entered the kitchen, she found the cabinet drawers and doors open, but there was no damage. It was from that point on that she began to consider the possibility—'with half my mind', as she put it—that she was sharing her house with a spirit who was trying to provoke her. As yet, however, she felt no threat from whatever it was. 'I felt it would do me no harm as long as I didn't cross it', she remembers.

(11) Frances began noting her dog Missie's behavior. 'She would be sound asleep, then she'd perk her ears up, run down the hall, scratch on the door, like someone was calling her; it was strange, queer; she never behaved like that before'. At other times Missie would rush across the room and cock her head back and forth, as if responding to someone calling her. (I witnessed this myself on the day of the exorcism). She had never done this before. Had it been a rabbit or some other animal outside, she would have run across the floor barking; Missie almost never barks at people.

(12) Frances noticed by accident that it was clammy and cold in one corner of the living room. The cold extended out into the room no more than four feet. 'You had to be right in the corner', she remembers. Luke later reported that Meg kept a large rubber tree in this corner.

(13) About a month after moving in, Frances began hanging pictures. One of these was a brightly colored picture of three women stylishly dressed in pre-Civil War costumes; each woman was framed by an oval cut out of the background. Frances tried to hang this picture five times in five different places, but on each occasion the picture was, as it were, 'taken down' from the wall overnight. The nail would still be in the wall, but the picture would be neatly propped up against the wall below where it had been hung, as if it had been placed there. After the fifth failure, Frances gave up the project for approximately ten days. 'Then one day it was as if a presence directed me to pick up the picture and hang it on the wall of the second bedroom next to the light switch. I would never have hung it there myself. It was much too low and too close to the light switch, but I felt myself directed to hang it exactly there. It was like getting feedback from addressing an audience—you know how you sense an audience disagreeing with you or getting into it with you. That's how it was'. From that time forward the picture did not budge. When Frances showed it to me, I found it indeed placed in a somewhat unlikely spot next to a light switch.

Shortly after the picture was successfully hung, Luke happened to be in Bakersfield visiting friends and dropped in to see Frances. She was showing him around the house, and he noticed the picture. 'I was shocked, stunned', he later told me. Meg had had a tri-oval picture very similar to it, though more subdued

in color, a reproduct

(14) Fra every time doing'. Bu

(15) O experience that on th bedroom happend t had replac her husba that was t had the fee kitchen. I Frances, h above), sta use the toi the city a Frances to

'While v startled ar anyone, a window sh sat on the world is h always kee window of Almost im room. At t other close the bed, w other and TOO MU Though I open, and pressure, concentrat on the bed. Missie was realized th me, and I v give it a tr through. I passed. I c crowd. I disintegrat passed rig

house well and
garage door.
ng about you

k about two
e living room
, and sounds
around'. The
e entered the
here was no
consider the
ing her house
felt no threat
dn't cross it',

uld be sound
the door, like
ved like that
ock her head
ed this myself
been a rabbit
loor barking;

one corner of
han four feet.
rted that Meg

atures. One of
d in pre-Civil
background.
, but on each
vernight. The
bed up against
ere. After the
ys. 'Then one
hang it on the
c have hung it
tch, but I felt
eedback from
agreeing with
e forward the
deed placed in

ened to be in
s showing him
nned', he later
more subdued

in color, and it had hung precisely in that spot. Luke later wondered if they were reproductions of the same print.

(14) Frances began to feel 'disagreeableness' when she fixed up the house—not every time, but often. 'It was as if it—I called it *it*—disapproved of what I was doing'. But as yet she sensed no danger from her 'intruder'.

(15) On January 25, 1982, almost two months after her move, Frances experienced the most terrifying night of her life. It is perhaps highly significant that on this day she bought paint and wallpaper to redecorate the master bedroom (formerly Meg's and now Frances' bedroom), and moreover that she happened to set these down on the counter in the kitchen—the very counter that had replaced the dinette set where Meg had eaten, worked, and conversed with her husband or friends, and that Frances had installed when she moved in and that was the focus of most of the movement in the kitchen. All that evening she had the feeling of being observed; after she went to bed, she heard a ruckus in the kitchen. 'It was like somebody was tearing the place up'. But it stopped, and Frances, having heard this sort of commotion once before (see paragraph 10 above), stayed in bed and drifted off into an uneasy sleep. At 2 a.m. she got up to use the toilet. She did not turn on any lights; glare from the street lights and from the city across the golf course provided enough light for her to see. I asked Frances to describe what followed, and here is her report:

'While washing my hands in the sink, the bathroom window slid back. I was startled and thought somebody was outside trying to break in. But I couldn't see anyone, and besides, the screen outside the window was in place. I pulled the window shut and, still not fully awake, yet alerted, went back into the bedroom, sat on the foot of the bed, and studied the bathroom wondering, 'What in the world is happening'? About this time, the large bedroom window, which I always keep open even on the coldest nights, slammed shut, and the bathroom window opened again with a bang, *both at the same time*. I jumped to my feet. Almost immediately the activity shifted to the two closets on the other side of the room. At the exact time that the folding doors of one closet opened, those of the other closed. This made quite a noise, and Missie was standing up on the foot of the bed, where she sleeps, turning her head back and forth from one closet to the other and yapping madly. Then I thought, "I've got to get out of here, this is just TOO MUCH"! With my heart racing I grabbed the dog and started for the hall. Though I had closed the door leading into the hall, as I always did, it was now open, and I charged through. But then I felt an impact; there was a zone of pressure, a mass out in the hall, as if something ominous and ugly was concentrated there. I stepped back into the frame of the doorway. Then I turned on the bedroom light (the switch was on the left) and looked to see who was there. Missie was yapping more shrilly than ever, but nothing visible was there. Then I realized that I had to get out of the house or I would die. But the hallway terrified me, and I wondered if I could break through the restricting force. I knew I had to give it a try, and I yelled loudly, "GET OUT OF MY WAY!" Then I charged through. I made contact with three entities. Two were on either side of me as I passed. I could literally feel them, just as one feels oneself brushed lightly in a crowd. I also knew that my passage in some way had caused them to disintegrate, to shatter, to lose power. They were startled and shocked that I had passed right through them. The third was directly in front of me but stepped

back a little as I came through. It was appalled that I had passed through the other two. I can't say *how* I know this, only that I know'.

'When I got to the end of the hall, I realized I was only in my nightgown. I wasn't about to go back in the bedroom to get my robe, so I went to the closet and grabbed my London Fog coat. I started to open the front door, realized the garage was shut, and that anyway my purse with the keys was on one of the dining room chairs. So I ran across the living room (the coat still over my arm), grabbed my purse, opened the back door leading into the garage, hit the switch that opens the garage door and started the motor as the door slowly rose (it seemed like a thousand years!) I put the car into reverse and hit the gas [accelerated—Ed.] so hard that I flew down the driveway clear across the street up over the curb into my neighbor's yard—the jolt going over the curb made me release the gas pedal [accelerator—Ed.]. Then I pulled the car into gear and roared down the street, turned the corner and headed towards Bakersfield downtown. Suddenly I wondered where I was going and why this way? I pulled over to the curb, realized I was shivering, got out of the car—I was still bearfoot in my nightgown!—and put my coat on, then got back in and started the heater. I sat there for at least an hour, cried, cursed; I was as mad [angry—Ed.] as I was terrified. Then I decided to drive to the Blue Moon Ranch [Frances' ranch—author] forty-two miles away because I couldn't see myself going to a motel looking like a wreck, with no shoes, and a nightgown hanging down below my coat. I remember that it was 4:25 when I got to the Ranch'.

'When I came home the next morning, I had fully resolved to **SELL THE HOUSE, EVEN IF I HAD TO TAKE A LOSS**. I just had to get out, this was intolerable. On entering the house I noticed a chill and a musty odor like a dirt cellar or a swamp, a smell of decay. Then I noticed that the light in front of the coat closet had been turned off, so had the light in the bedroom, and the electric blanket. Then I saw why it was so cold—the bathroom window was still wide open. So was the garage door—I hadn't pressed the genie [switch—Ed.] to close it when I left the night before'.

That afternoon Frances went to work as usual. For the next week she slept fully clothed on the couch in her living room.

THE FIRST INVESTIGATION AND EXORCISM

As described above, Frances' friend Paula called me. This was January 27, two days after Frances' terrifying experience. Ava, Jennie, and I arrived at Frances' house about the same time, 1:30 p.m.

At this point I must say a word about Ava and Jennie. Ava is a brilliant, multi-talented woman, a little over forty. She attended on scholarship and graduated from Scripps College, has since written several plays and a novel, and has a healing gift. I know her very well indeed. As for Jennie, she is as natural and uninhibited a teenager as any I have known. It is extremely unlikely that she faked what I witnessed; if there was any deliberate deception, it was she herself whom she deceived. Jennie 'sees' internal organs, auras, and spirits. Her clairvoyant talents, coupled with her mother's gift of analysis, amateur knowledge of parapsychology, and overall sensitivity bordering on clairvoyance, were, I hoped, the allies I needed in order to help Frances.

It is worth noting Ava and Jennie's reaction as they entered the house. Each

looked at t
minutes Jer
lost young
was probab

Frances
house and
towards Fr

I could
nomena th
latches on
doors in Fr
close, and
condition. I
joined then
ostensible i

After est
(and I) mov
sensitives
skeptical ar
room and w
worth notir
room. For s
was staged
have notice
her) and ga
she simply
sensitivity v
God! What
Frances ha
the table at
invisible ha
Frances ha
indentation
moments b
furniture ir
earlier had

The rest
living room
worth notin
as a descrip
would not fi
with 'gettin
using the te
think of an

Ava's ap
reminiscent
'stayed in t
directly to t

l through the

nightgown. I
the closet and
, realized the
on one of the
over my arm),
hit the switch
lowly rose (it
d hit the gas
ross the street
curb made me
into gear and
ls Bakersfield
way? I pulled
s still bearfoot
d the heater. I
-Ed.] as I was
ch [Frances'
self going to a
g down below

o SELL THE
t out, this was
odor like a dirt
in front of the
nd the electric
was still wide
-Ed.] to close
k she slept fully

as January 27,
d I arrived at

t is a brilliant,
holarship and
nd a novel, and
as natural and
likely that she
was she herself
d spirits. Her
lysis, amateur
n clairvoyance,

he house. Each

looked at the other and frowned: to them the place seemed 'charged'. Within minutes Jennie had 'seen', not one 'spirit', but three—an older couple and a sad, lost young woman in her early twenties. Both Ava and Jennie agreed that the girl was probably not the poltergeist agent.

Frances described the phenomena she had witnessed while I examined the house and looked for normal explanations. Meanwhile the sensitives gravitated towards Frances' (formerly Meg's) bedroom at the end of the hallway.

I could discover no satisfactory normal explanation for the strange phenomena that for two months had bothered and finally terrified Frances. The latches on the doors leading off the hall worked, the sliding windows and closet doors in Frances' bedroom required a normal push before they would open or close, and the drawers and doors in the kitchen were in normal working condition. Meanwhile Ava and Jennie were having better luck, and by the time I joined them, in Frances' bedroom, they felt that they were *en rapport* with the ostensible intruders.

After establishing communication with the 'older couple', Ava and Jennie (and I) moved into the bedroom next to the living room; this room impressed the sensitives as peculiarly gloomy and oppressive. Meanwhile Frances was skeptical and rather disgusted with the queer procedure, and she sat in the living room and waited. Two things happened while we were in this bedroom that are worth noting. (1) Jennie's eyes followed the 'movements' of the invisibles in the room. For several reasons it seems to me highly unlikely that her eye movement was staged for my benefit; it was done without fanfare, and I might easily not have noticed; she was totally absorbed in the adventure (that is what it was for her) and gave no hint of insincerity or even self-consciousness; most importantly, she simply is not the sort of person who would stoop to deceit—she wears her sensitivity very lightly. (2) Frances suddenly screamed from the living room, 'My God! What are you doing in there!' We left the bedroom at once and learned that Frances had just seen one of the dining room chairs, which had stood away from the table at a 45° angle, slowly turn and pull itself up against the table as if some invisible hand were 'straightening up'. I was privately skeptical and wondered if Frances hadn't imagined it. But upon close investigation I noticed four clear indentations on the thick carpet where the rollers of the chair had apparently sat moments before. This was the only time in two months that Frances *saw* furniture in movement; the slamming windows and closet doors two nights earlier had been heard, not seen, at least not clearly seen.

The rest of the afternoon—an hour and a half—we spent with Frances in the living room, where Ava dealt first with the invisibles, and then with Frances. It is worth noting that both Ava and Jennie object strenuously to the word 'exorcism' as a description of what was accomplished. First, they say, they did not and would not force the spirits out of the house, and second, they were not concerned with 'getting rid' of the spirits, with merely stopping the negative activity. I am using the term, however, with those reservations, because neither they nor I can think of another one to describe the process.

Ava's approach was both imaginative and rational. In many ways it was reminiscent of Prince's successful approach in the 1922 Latimer case, in which he 'stayed in the patient's presence talking, . . . friendly but seriously, speaking directly to the alleged spirit' (Jacobson, 1974, pp. 160–161). Ava proceeded in a

three-step fashion: (1) She began by getting the "spirits" relaxed: 'Let's imagine them in an old fashioned porch swing right here [the entryway]', Ava told Jennie, and they invited the 'spirits' to sit down, swing, and relax. (2) Ava tried to convince the spirits that *place* only existed for them because of their belief in it. She explained to them that if they thought in another way, they would find themselves on another 'plane' altogether, one in which 'place' was only a fiction. As she talked, both Ava and Jennie 'felt' them drift away, and, after searching the house for signs of them, declared them to be gone. (3) Ava tried to convince Frances that the poltergeist effects she had experienced were impossible without subconscious "permission" and participation on her part. She suggested that in order to move objects, cause feelings, etc., Meg had to 'borrow' energy from someone—in this case, Frances. She was completely unsuccessful in persuading Frances of the existence, in herself, of any kind of 'invitation', conscious or unconscious, for this kind of activity. However, she did get Frances to concede that the moment Ava and Jennie had 'felt' the spirits leave the entryway 'swing', she, herself, had felt the atmosphere become lighter and less oppressive. She now confirmed that a 'heaviness' and 'darkness' that had been there since the first day she viewed the house, and had therefore not been noticeable to her, seemed to be gone. Ava instructed her first that this feeling of heaviness could be voluntarily dispelled, and second that she could control any future 'invasions' simply by training herself not to feel it. (Frances later told me that she absolutely rejected the hypothesis behind this).

A strange thing happened that night: absolutely nothing. There were no sounds, and even the doors stayed shut. 'Well what do you know?' a surprised but still very skeptical Frances thought to herself the next morning. For the next week she slept on the living room couch fully dressed, with the keys in the car and the garage door open—she kept her 'flee zone' clear of obstacles. She continued to live on edge, but she had decided to wait and see before she put the house up for sale. She did not have to. Whatever the poltergeist was, it had been neutralized—apparently by the exorcism. That summer Frances painted and wallpapered the bedroom. There was no reprisal.

In spite of the fact that in the spring and summer of 1982, after the exorcism, Frances suffered acute stress in connection with her health—she had gall bladder surgery in April and a heart attack in September—and her job—she received life-threatening phone calls in August—there was no trace of the poltergeist until Christmas 1982, eleven months after the exorcism. From then until April 1983 the doors to the unused bedrooms and bathroom occasionally opened of themselves at night when Frances was sleeping. However, they did not, as before, open widely, but were only cracked. Since then, with the exception of one week in early December 1983, there has been no activity.

II. THE EARLIER PHENOMENA

Luckily, the three adults I have worked with in this case are all intelligent, articulate, sane, and honest. Ava and Jennie I already knew to be people of integrity. Frances and Luke were strangers to me before the case, but long conversations with them have reassured me. I extensively interviewed Luke and Frances together and each individually. Four months elapsed between the initial

in-depth in more follow find the req

I have n 1977 and 19 come down play golf. V that Luke h the house l

It was n Finally, on and France extraordina above. Fra they walked noticed the the hell did be a messag took it to be an intellige

It was du impressions Frances', b

Luke loo leave. He fi of these trip into a cold happen bef

On a few an extremel Yet there w occasion, w someone ha opened dur would alwa my head ar

Luke rep an 'incredil death.

DISCUSSION

We mus recounted a we can dis overlooked Once we ha the questio the phenom

'Let's imagine
ay]', Ava told
(2) Ava tried
their belief in it.
they would find
s only a fiction.
r searching the
ed to convince
ossible without
ggested that in
v' energy from
l in persuading
, conscious or
ces to concede
ryway 'swing',
essive. She now
nce the first day
r, seemed to be
be voluntarily
ons' simply by
olutely rejected

There were no
w?' a surprised
ig. For the next
s in the car and
She continued
at the house up
s, it had been
es painted and

r the exorcism,
ad gall bladder
—she received
oltergeist until
until April 1983
ally opened of
ey did not, as
ception of one

: all intelligent,
to be people of
case, but long
ewed Luke and
ween the initial

in-depth interview of them together in December 1982 and the half-dozen or more follow-up individual interviews in April and May 1983. I was pleased to find the reports mutually consistent and corroborative.

I have mentioned that Luke periodically made trips to Bakersfield between 1977 and 1981 and stayed in the house, which was otherwise vacant. He would come down to take care of the house and yard, enjoy solitude, see old friends, and play golf. What neither Frances nor I realized at the time of the exorcism was that Luke himself and his wife, Johnella, had encountered strange phenomena in the house long before Frances moved in.

It was not until after the exorcism that Frances and Luke traded stories. Finally, on December 10, 1982, I met Luke for the first time. For seven hours he and Frances and I talked, as I tried to piece the puzzle together. The most extraordinary piece of evidence was of course the picture episode, recounted above. Frances had been showing Luke around the house, as people do, when they walked into the second bedroom. As they were leaving the room, Luke noticed the tri-oval picture. 'I just stopped, I was frozen', he remembers. 'Why in the hell did you hang that picture there!' he blurted out. Luke took the picture to be a message from Meg to him, 'her way of letting me know she was present'. I took it to be an indication that the poltergeist, whatever or whoever it was, was an intelligent agent.

It was during this interview that Luke fully divulged to me his experience and impressions in the house from 1977 to 1981. They were not nearly as striking as Frances', but they are significant.

Luke looked forward to coming to Bakersfield, and he was always sorry to leave. He figures he made at least fifty trips from 1977 through 1981. But on four of these trips, he states, 'The second I walked through the front door, I broke out into a cold sweat. It was very unpleasant, frightening. I had never had this happen before, and it's never happened since'.

On a few occasions the bedroom doors, which Luke methodically closed ('I am an extremely methodical person'), would be open when he came down to visit. Yet there was no other evidence that someone had been in the house. (On one occasion, when the house was actually broken into, it was abundantly clear that someone had been in the house.) Furthermore, these same doors were sometimes opened during the night when Luke slept, just as they had been for Frances. 'I would always tell myself', Luke remembers, 'that I was slipping; I would shake my head and wonder, half seriously, if I was losing my mind!'

Luke reports certain feelings that he had while staying in the house, especially an 'incredible experience' of Meg's comforting presence on the night of her death.

DISCUSSION OF PARANORMALITY

We must first ask if there are normal explanations of the phenomena recounted above. Specifically, we must first consider the possibility of fraud. If we can dispose of that possibility, we must then ask ourselves if we have overlooked normal physical or psychological explanations of the phenomena. Once we have disposed of these alternative explanations, we can directly address the question at issue here: does the living agent hypothesis satisfactorily explain the phenomena?

It is inconceivable to me that Frances was motivated by a desire to deceive. First, she and I met only after her friend Paula, wife of Frances' real estate agent, took it upon herself to call me; Frances had made up her mind to sell the house when she called Paula; she had no intention of calling in a parapsychologist or of having her unwelcome 'guest' exorcised: she had given up. Second, she had nothing to gain from fraud. On the contrary, she consented to let me contact the newspaper only on condition that her identity in no way be revealed. And when I informed her that I intended to tell her story to a professional audience, I had to assure her it was unlikely that anyone in Bakersfield would read my account; even at that she asked that I not use the name that people know her by. ('Frances' is her unused first name.) Third, I have personally come to know Frances as an honest person. As a direct result of our acquaintance, I joined the board that at the time she directed and know her both as a businesswoman and a friend. She is a person of the highest integrity. I have talked to several of her friends, and they entirely share my evaluation of her character. Fourth, the manner of her recounting some of the events described above was emotionally charged and overwhelmingly earnest. It was obvious that she had been terrified on the climactic night. Fifth, close cross-examination on three occasions—January 1982, December 1982, and April 1983—revealed no important inconsistencies. Sixth, when I asked if I could stay in the house overnight once the doors began opening again in early 1983, she not only consented, but offered to leave the house and sleep at her ranch in order to remove all suspicion that she was opening the doors herself.

But even if we can dismiss the possibility of fraud in the case of Frances, what about Luke? Luke, after all, was a believer; he had read enough about psychical research to know, for example, what a poltergeist typically did, and he was not reluctant to entertain a spiritualistic hypothesis to explain certain phenomena he had read about. Is it possible that Luke, sensing that he could help create a sensation, invented his side of the story 'just for the hell of it'? For a while I forced myself to worry about this a little, but during several long telephone conversations to him in Petaluma in April and May 1983, all suspicions were quelled.

In the first place, Luke, like Frances, had nothing to gain. When he and Frances first traded stories, I was nowhere in sight. At that time I had no intention of reporting the case to a professional audience anyway. Second, even though there remained the outside possibility that he was having a little fun at Frances' expense, this possibility seemed more and more remote the more I thought about his testimony and the more I quizzed him over the phone. Most impressively, Luke did not take any of the bait I threw him. He insisted, for example, that even though his wife had heard unexplained footsteps in the hall of the house when they stayed in it after Meg's death, he never had. Nor did he embellish his story in any way the other times we talked (in April and May 1983): he never *saw* anything move or *heard* any unexplained sound during all the time he stayed in the house. The only phenomena which puzzled him were the opened doors, and even in that case he did not seriously propose to himself a paranormal explanation until Frances mentioned that *she* had found the same doors mysteriously opened. Would a trickster be so modest in his inventions? Most decisive, however, is the picture episode. When Frances was showing Luke

around the tri-oval pic moment, th of Luke's si pictures, in an obsession There is not phone durin consistent v

We can s interpretati satisfactoril

For a nur up because washer simu Perhaps it h the plumbe explanation Frances mo since the lig switches, th lights come in the corn disagreeable 15) on the c mention sup general too 'number of p 'comforting

But for th to assume implausible it explain th exorcism—in Frances, wh for almost a history at al into her new had not hal earlier, etc.

There is o a sleepwalke drawers in implausibilit sleep—it fail asleep when she was not

The only e

desire to deceive. real estate agent, to sell the house psychologist or of second, she had let me contact the led. And when I audience, I had to read my account; we know her by. Why come to know nce, I joined the esswoman and a to several of her ter. Fourth, the was emotionally ad been terrified ion on three 13—revealed no ay in the house 13, she not only anch in order to

of Frances, what about psychical, and he was not n phenomena he ld help create a r a while I forced long telephone suspicions were

1. When he and t time I had no ay. Second, even ing a little fun at note the more I the phone. Most He insisted, for teps in the hall of had. Nor did he April and May nd during all the led him were the pose to himself a l found the same a his inventions? as showing Luke

around the house for the first time after she had 'fixed it up', he saw Frances' tri-oval picture and started in amazement. And it was then, right at that moment, that he vented his astonishment, with Frances noting it well. The proof of Luke's sincerity is Meg's picture, which he keeps, along with other of her pictures, in storage in Petaluma. Finally, I should hasten to add that no one but an obsessional parapsychologist would be likely to doubt Luke's word anyway. There is nothing about him which suggests a shyster, and his testimony over the phone during the later interviews (four and five months after the first) was consistent with the first.

We can safely rule out fraud in this case. But what about our paranormal interpretation of the events? Are there no normal *physical* explanations which satisfactorily account for the phenomena?

For a number of them, yes. The sewer system, for example, probably backed up because on her first morning in the house Frances showered and used the washer simultaneously. (See item 3 under 'The Reported Phenomena' above.) Perhaps it had been years since the system had received such stress; in any case the plumbers reported the pipes were clogged with roots. The same kind of explanation suffices to account for the broken garage-door (item 8), which after Frances moved in received unaccustomed use. One might also surmise that, since the light-switch episodes (item 9) were neutralized by replacing the light switches, there was something faulty in the old light switches which made the lights come on by themselves. One might also dismiss Frances' sensation of cold in the corner where Meg had kept the rubber tree (12), her sensations of disagreeableness (item 14), and her feeling that the house was malodorous (item 15) on the day of her return after her night of terror. Reports of smells, not to mention supersensible gradations in psychological comfort, are too subtle and in general too 'soft' for the scientist to trust, unless instruments are in use or a large number of people report the phenomena. Luke's overwhelming sense of Meg's 'comforting presence' on the night of her death also falls into this category.

But for the rest of the phenomena I find no normal explanation, unless we are to assume that Frances is a chronic hallucinator. But even this wildly implausible hypothesis fails to explain the 'coincidence' of the pictures. Nor does it explain the indentations on the rug, left by the rotating chair on the day of the exorcism—indentations which I myself observed. Still less does it explain why Frances, who had no faith in Ava and Jennie's exorcism, stopped 'hallucinating' for almost a year after the exorcism. Nor does it explain why Frances, with no history at all of hallucination, should begin to 'hallucinate' the day she moved into her new house, or why, if stress or trauma is presumed to be the cause, she had not hallucinated after her husband's unexpected death nineteen months earlier, etc.

There is one other normal explanation that has occurred to me: that Frances is a sleepwalker, and a masochistic one at that! Did Frances open the doors and drawers in her sleep? This is most unlikely. Aside from the antecedent implausibility of this explanation—no one has ever told her she walked in her sleep—it fails to account for the most striking phenomena: for Frances was not asleep when the two most violent episodes commenced (items 10 and 15), and she was not even in the house when some of the others occurred.

The only explanation that covers *all* the phenomena is a paranormal one. The

most severe thumping and scraping and sliding noises in the kitchen, the almost nightly opening or closing of drawers and doors, the banging windows and closet doors in the bedroom on the climactic night, the five-times displaced picture, and the moving chair—especially when considered together—can be reasonably accounted for only by invoking a poltergeist as agent. Also, the strange reactions of the dog, the light-switch phenomena, the displaced vanity bench, and the cold spot in the house, though not by themselves decisive, give additional force to the poltergeist hypothesis. Finally, it is certainly possible that the broken garage door and plugged drain, and Frances' 'feelings of disagreeableness' and disapproval when she fixed up the house were poltergeist-related. The bundle-of-sticks analogy—one stick might break, but many in a bundle will not—points forcefully to paranormality: it might be possible to account for one or two of the phenomena by a normal explanation, but it is unreasonable to the point of absurdity to try to account for *all* of them in this way.

These are the facts in a nutshell: Frances Freeborn is an intelligent, stable, honest woman in her sixties with no history of, or special interest in, paranormal experience. For two months, in the winter of 1981–82, the house she had just moved into 'went crazy', and there are no plausible, other than paranormal, explanations for all the phenomena she endured. Moreover, the most repetitious phenomenon was experienced occasionally by the house's previous, if irregular, tenant. Finally, many of the phenomena, paranormal or otherwise, associated with the case tantalizingly point to some connection with a person who died in 1976, Meg Lyons.

WHO IS THE AGENT?

The question we want to answer is by now clear to everyone: Is the living Frances or the dead Meg the Kern City poltergeist?

In one authoritative study, Owen (1967) concluded that 'the data assembled here do little to support the notion of a poltergeist as an independent entity distinct from an extension of the medium's personality. . . . the poltergeist is no *geist*, but merely a phenomenon' (p. 431). But Osis and McCormick (1982) were confident that they had unearthed at least one case that was not amenable to the living agent hypothesis so confidently advanced by the more conservative wing of parapsychology. And earlier Stevenson (1972) made it clear that he was far from convinced that all poltergeist cases could be explained by the living agent hypothesis: 'some poltergeists are living and others are dead', he held (p. 251).

To help the investigator discriminate living from discarnate agents, Stevenson devised a 'pattern analysis', and it is to this that we must turn now. Stevenson believed that a discarnate agent, presumably possessing intelligence and a will of its own, would demonstrate 'capacities, motives, and manifestations' (p. 248) different from those of a living agent unconscious of playing any role whatever in producing the phenomena. In the latter case one would expect movements more consistent with what Gauld and Cornell, summarizing Stevenson's theory, call 'a mere blind letting-off of steam' (1979, p. 351), while in the former one might expect to find movements suggestive of intelligent purpose. For example, if the agent is living and the phenomena are a result of unconsciously generated force, one would expect to find objects broken or scattered around the house rather than objects 'placed' or gently moved. Or one would expect to find the

phenomena particular j
quelling th
many to su
Cornell, 19
Stevenson's

I believe
by the case
is inconsist

(1) A ra
turned doo

(2) A ra
propelled tl
during the
the floor.

(3) The
the house.'
and occasi
And of cou
foot in the
when (pres
assume tha
at a great d

(4) The
about the l
'chosen'. An
other light c

(5) If a r
poltergeist
would have
perhaps bro
the floor, ne
hung by Fra
found it or
experimente
showed ever

(6) There
frequently tl
but in an ad
occurred wh
while she wa
objects near
objects close

(7) It is
clustering o
feel that this
repressed gr
would be mc

hen, the almost
dows and closet
ed picture, and
be reasonably
range reactions
ch, and the cold
onal force to the
broken garage
eableness' and
st-related. The
n a bundle will
account for one
asonable to the

elligent, stable,
in, paranormal
ise she had just
an paranormal,
most repetitious
ous, if irregular,
wise, associated
son who died in

ne: Is the living

data assembled
ependent entity
poltergeist is no
nick (1982) were
amenable to the
servative wing of
t he was far from
the living agent
he held (p. 251).
gents, Stevenson
now. Stevenson
ence and a will of
tations' (p. 248)
role whatever in
movements more
n's theory, call 'a
ormer one might
r example, if the
generated force,
the house rather
ect to find the

phenomena localized around one particular living person rather than a particular place, or that psychotherapy would be a far more effective means of quelling the poltergeist than exorcism. Stevenson lists thirteen features, too many to summarize here (see Stevenson, 1972, pp. 248-249, and Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p. 350), but the analysis which follows should make entirely clear Stevenson's approach, for it is mine too, though with a few additions.

I believe that an intelligent, self-determining, purposeful agency is demanded by the case we have explored; a 'mere blind letting-off of steam', a random force is inconsistent with the phenomena. Let us consider why:

(1) A random force might have rattled doors, even smashed them in, but not turned doorknobs, as evidently happened night after night.

(2) A random force might have rattled drawers, or, if sufficiently violent, propelled them out of their slots. But the cabinet drawers, though usually opened during the night, were never opened *too far* and as a result were never found on the floor.

(3) The phenomena could and sometimes did occur when Frances was not in the house. The lights would often be turned on when she was out of the house, and occasionally the doors, which she always kept closed, would be opened too. And of course the doors had been opening for Luke long before Frances ever set foot in the house. Moreover, the shutting off of the lights and the electric blanket when (presumably) she was at the ranch point to an intelligent will, unless we assume that random energy is capable of a tidying-up tendency and can operate at a great distance.

(4) The objects moved were selective. There were many lighter objects lying about the house which a random force would have moved before the ones 'chosen'. And there was not a single case of breakage of a dish or saucer or any other light object.

(5) If a random force had been operative, the tri-oval picture targeted by the poltergeist (let us assume for the moment that random force can have targets) would have been found in the morning sprawling on the floor at an angle and perhaps broken. Instead, on each of five occasions, it was found 'propped up' on the floor, neatly leaning against the wall immediately below the place it had been hung by Frances the previous day. If the picture had fallen, Frances would have found it on its back or face down at a random angle (as I did when I experimented with a picture of my own), and very likely broken. The picture showed every evidence of having been *placed*, not dropped.

(6) There was no tendency for objects close to Frances to move more frequently than objects far away from her. The picture was not in her bedroom, but in an adjoining bedroom; the first violent movement of objects in the kitchen occurred while she was fifteen feet away sitting in the living room, the second while she was twenty feet away in her bedroom. Only on the climactic night did objects near her move. If Frances herself were the agent, one would expect objects close to her to be more violently moved than objects farther away.

(7) It is generally acknowledged that there is a disproportionately large clustering of poltergeist activity around adolescents. Many parapsychologists feel that this is so because adolescents are, on the whole, the most frustrated and repressed group in our society, and that therefore it is to be expected that they would be most likely to express themselves unconsciously in poltergeist activity.

Using this dubious rationale, I would, speaking from my own experience, expect to find poltergeists focusing on newly divorced or grieving people in disproportionate numbers, rather than on adolescents. But be that as it may, the fact remains that adolescents have been singled out as the group best equipped to generate from their unconsciousness poltergeist activity. According to Stevenson's pattern analysis, a person well beyond adolescence would be less likely to have this unenviable talent. Thus, in the present case, there is a greater likelihood that the real agent is discarnate than would be the case if Frances was a teenager.

(8) Stevenson rightly suspects that an exorcism would have a much greater chance of working with a discarnate agent than with a living agent, especially one who was extremely skeptical of the entire bizarre procedure. The exorcism was indeed the 'therapy' which worked, but it is hard to imagine how it could have worked *with Frances*. Recall that she was very surprised the next morning when she found the doors still closed, and that she expected the poltergeist's return at any time.

(9) Parapsychologists are eager to discover harrowing inner conflicts in presumed poltergeist agents in order to explain why *they* of all people would manifest poltergeist activity. I think it is highly significant that Frances, during the two months duration of the poltergeist from December 1981 through January 1982, was experiencing no unusual stress, but that two or three months *after* the activity ceased she began to experience severe stress. She was forced out of her job in August 1982 and suffered a heart attack in early September while travelling in China. Frances still rankles at the way she was forced to resign, yet during the intensely stressful summer of 1982 *there was no poltergeist activity at all*. Why not, if Frances was the agent?

(10) For what it is worth, Frances insists that she was *not* the agent. If she were not so wise a woman (admittedly an untestable assumption), I would be unimpressed by this disavowal. Her explanation of how she knows she was not, is worth repeating: 'I've been having headaches lately. A brain scan revealed nothing. Can you believe the doctor told me I had probably bumped my head and that this was the cause? I told him I'd have known if I'd bumped my head that hard! This poltergeist is like that. I would *know* if I were the cause!'

I believe that the above ten points argue strongly for discarnate agency. But we have not looked at the strongest evidence yet. What if we could make a good case, not only for discarnate agency, but for *a specific discarnate agent*? I believe that the latter case would enforce the former. If I were a detective trying to solve a murder, and had good evidence that the murderer was a friend of the victim rather than a stranger, would not this evidence be greatly enhanced if additional evidence pointed to a *specific* friend? Let us now look at the evidence which in so many ways points to Meg, deceased in 1976, as the poltergeist agent. The most persuasive evidence of her agency can be gathered under two general headings:

(1) The poltergeist activity conforms, not to shifts in Frances' mental or emotional state, but to *alterations in the house*. The major alteration was, we might think, Frances' living in the house. But was it? Perhaps the wholesale refurbishing of the house, the redesign of the kitchen, and the new paint and wallpaper would be more distressing to a discarnate homeowner than the appearance of a 'guest'. (How does one speculate safely about such matters?) In

any case, the completed with counted new kitchen night the pol kitchen. For poltergeist's cabinet; the rumbustious and doors t moving in c activity. Let experienced night that I only a few

It would link between weeks after major, potential anything sp episode that unseen force potentially evening of J; a second up which Frances that Frances: the master happened to kitchen. It is by 'Meg' an 'intruder'. I we recall that to move into

(2) Never that 'Meg' v follows that refer to the p coincidence pictures. Tv presently ha many picture the house. closely resen picture in pr due to chan the picture a the sixth ar

own experience, believing people in what as it may, the best equipped to according to Steven- d be less likely to ere is a greater use if Frances was

e a much greater agent, especially re. The exorcism gine how it could the next morning the poltergeist's

anner conflicts in all people would t Frances, during through January e months *after* the forced out of her September while rced to resign, yet *geist activity at all.*

agent. If she were on), I would be ows she was not, is ain scan revealed bumped my head bumped my head the cause!

rnate agency. But ould make a good *gent?* I believe that e trying to solve a iend of the victim anced if additional idence which in so t agent. The most general headings: rances' mental or ion was, we might ps the wholesale he new paint and eowner than the such matters?) In

any case, the first major *structural alteration* took place in the kitchen and was completed on the very day Frances moved in: workmen installed a bulky cabinet with counter-top in the exact place where Meg's dinette set had been, put in a new kitchen sink and raised it a few inches, and put in new formica. That very night the poltergeist phenomena began, and the locus of this first activity was the kitchen. For the next two months the kitchen would be the target of the poltergeist's activity. The opened drawers belonged to the new (offending?) cabinet; the kitchen door was usually opened during the night; and the two most rumbustious, noisy outbursts occurred in the kitchen, with the cabinet drawers and doors the specific targets. It is reasonable to assume that either Frances' moving in or her renovation of the house, especially the kitchen, triggered the activity. Let us recall that Luke never experienced any auditory phenomena; he experienced only the opened doors. The aggravated activity began on the very night that Frances with all her furniture moved in, and this move followed by only a few hours the structural alterations in the kitchen.

It would bode well for the deceased person hypothesis if we could discover a link between the *first violent activity* in the kitchen, which occurred about two weeks after the move (see item 10 under 'Reported Phenomena'), and some major, potentially disturbing alteration in the house. But Frances cannot recall anything special about that day or night: she remembers only that it was this episode that forced her to wonder, for the first time, if there was a disruptive unseen force in the house. The link between the *second* violent outbreak and a potentially disruptive alteration is easy to discover, however. Recall that on the evening of January 25, 1982, shortly after Frances had gotten into bed, there was a second uproar in the kitchen. Then, a few hours later, the climactic disturbance which Frances felt threatened her life occurred. It was earlier on this same day that Frances purchased paint and wallpaper with the intention of redecorating the master bedroom, the bedroom that had been Meg's. Moreover, Frances happened to place the paint, of all places, on top of the new counter in the kitchen. It is tempting to speculate that this double insult could not be tolerated by 'Meg' and made her an implacable enemy determined to rid *her* home of the 'intruder'. This rather risky speculation becomes slightly more plausible when we recall that Meg was attached to the house and wanted her daughter Johnella to move into the house.

(2) Nevertheless, the above considerations by themselves fail to convince us that 'Meg' was the poltergeist. It is only when we combine them with what now follows that we are forced, in my opinion, to conclude that 'Meg' was the agent. I refer to the picture episode. The uniqueness of this case hangs on the remarkable coincidence that Meg and Frances happened fortuitously to have similar pictures. Two or three dozen pictures, mirrors, and various other hangings presently hang in Frances' house; Luke and Frances both report that Meg hung many pictures, most of them family photographs, during her earthly tenure in the house. The fact that both women happened to hang two pictures which closely resemble each other is due to chance, but the fact that Frances hung her picture in *precisely the same place* in the house that Meg had hung hers could not be due to chance, especially when we recall Frances' five aborted attempts to hang the picture and then the ouija board-like guidance she felt as she hung the picture the sixth and final time. Everything about this episode suggests intelligent

guidance; considered along with all the other phenomena, it points almost irresistibly to 'Meg'. We can now speculate with considerable confidence that 'Meg' still exists discarnately, and that for a few years she continued to live in the house to which she in life was so attached. Just as the living who have formed deep attachments dislike change, so 'Meg' disliked the changes that Frances was bringing about in the house. Defeated at every turn by the innovative and more powerful (because embodied) Frances, 'Meg' scored her lone victory when she guided Frances' picture to its rightful place, and later nearly scored a decisive victory by almost driving Frances out of the house.

It is worth noting that Luke, as soon as he saw the picture, thought 'Meg' was trying to send *him* a message. Luke is convinced to this day that 'Meg', who knew he would sooner or later visit and would recognize the picture in its place, was trying to greet him. I do not agree with Luke, but even if we could be persuaded that he was correct, the case for 'Meg's' agency would be in no way weakened.

There are three less important evidences of 'Meg's' agency that bear mentioning. 'Meg always kept the doors open; she liked the feeling of an open house', Luke recalls. This habit of hers in life would explain her open-door fetish in death, once Luke came along with his energy-saving closed-door policy. Secondly, we should not forget Luke's description of his mother-in-law as 'a dominating woman . . . stubborn as hell . . . used to getting her way', and as unprepared to die; perhaps she was unwilling to accept the usual consequences of death once it overtook her, and had the determination and the power to make an exception of herself, however unwise her decision might have been. Finally, it is a curious fact that the very minor disturbances that restarted around Christmas 1982 coincided with Frances' moving of the tri-oval picture, and that not long after I persuaded Frances, for experimental purposes, to hang the picture back where it "belonged", all activity ceased within a week.

To conclude, I think that the evidence presented in this paper is best explained by postulating a self-determining, more-or-less intelligent discarnate agent, with links to a known deceased personality, as poltergeist. Whether or not 'Meg' is as human or as alive as she was in the flesh is a matter beyond the scope of this study; but there can be little doubt that the phenomena point to *some* kind of intelligent agent and that no living person's agency can accommodate all the phenomena.

POSTSCRIPT: PUTTING THE GEIST BACK INTO THE POLTERGEIST

Stevenson entitled his study of poltergeist patterns: 'Are Poltergeists living or Are They Dead?' (1972) and answered this question: 'Neither always. Some poltergeists are living and others are dead.' Many parapsychologists would dispute this claim. Led by the well known law of parsimony they conclude that the living agent hypothesis is presumably the explanation of *all* poltergeist phenomena 'For we know that living agents exist' they say 'whereas to postulate discarnate agents is to lumber the universe with a highly questionable and probably superfluous class of furnishings' (see Gauld & Cornell (1979) p. 343).

I, too, am uncomfortable with Stevenson's conclusion; the law of parsimony leads me, as it does the conservative (often materialist) wing of parapsychology, to look for *one* explanation of all these phenomena rather than two. But I am led in exactly the opposite direction from them: where they see living agency, I see

discarnate
conservat
explain m
(Gauld &
1982) anc
agency by
saying, wi
if we are
prepared
consider.

The first
particular
poltergeist
something to
to the phe
we have a
sole cause o
under the
be the case
the living
discarnate
living pers
accounts fo
but in neit

The second
successful

Mrs. I
him to
the po
his ca
while
ADC s
his jac
come
confir
297-29

This case
family were
the polterg
Gordon Da
any doubt t
or unfortun
place when
the phenom
the agent?
Stevenson's
discarnate a

points almost confidence that ed to live in the io have formed at Frances was ative and more ctory when she ored a decisive

ught 'Meg' was Meg', who knew n its place, was d be persuaded way weakened. ncy that bear ling of an open open-door fetish ed-door policy. er-in-law as 'a er way', and as al consequences e power to make een. Finally, it started around icture, and that es, to hang the eek.

s best explained nate agent, with r not 'Meg' is as he scope of this to *some* kind of nmodate all the

POLTERGEIST

erghosts living or r always. Some hologists would ey conclude that f *all* poltergeist reas to postulate uestionable and l (1979) p. 343). w of parsimony parapsychology, vo. But I am led ng agency, I see

discarnate agency as the better all-encompassing hypothesis. I differ from the conservatives because the living agent hypothesis clearly and indubitably fails to explain many of the well attested cases including the Charlottenburg case of 1929 (Gauld & Cornell 1979, Chap. 8), the New Jersey case (Osis & McCormick 1982) and, most obviously, the present case. On the other hand, the discarnate agency hypothesis handily explains all these cases. But, are we not better off saying, with Stevenson that some cases only demand a discarnate agency? Only if we are prepared to sacrifice the law of parsimony which I, for one, am not prepared to do. Yet there are problems with this hypothesis which we must now consider.

The first objection is that in most poltergeist cases the phenomena focus on a particular living person, who is assumed to be the agent. All students of the poltergeist acknowledge that in most cases a particular living person has *something* to do with the phenomena, and that in most cases he is so closely related to the phenomena that it is easy to imagine him as the generating force. But do we have any unassailable evidence that he really is the generating force, or the *sole cause* of the force? Bracketing for now the evidence to be considered below under the second objection, it is safe to say that we do not. It could just as easily be the case that a discarnate agent is using and directing force 'borrowed' from the living personality. But we need not even assume such 'borrowing'; the discarnate agent may have the wherewithal to move objects himself, and the living personality might merely be the agent's target. Either of these suppositions accounts for the focusing effect of the phenomena on the particular living person, but in neither would he be the agent.

The second objection is far more serious. Cornell described a case in which he successfully 'exorcised' a poltergeist:

Mrs. M., in fact, was so nervous that ADC [Cornell] felt it incumbent upon him to attempt to dispel the phenomena. . . . He then promised to get rid of the poltergeist. He collected some mysterious-looking odds and ends from his car, and went into one of the bedrooms, saying, 'Whatever happens while I am in there, no matter what you hear, you must not come in.' . . . ADC sat inside smoking a cigarette. After fifteen minutes he emerged, with his jacket off and his tie pulled down, and dramatically stated it would not come back. All were impressed. . . . A few days later the vicar wrote confirming that there had been no further trouble (Gauld and Cornell, pp. 297-298).

This case suggests *prima facie* that one or more of the three members of the M. family were the agents, and that all Cornell had to do was make the M.s. *believe* the poltergeist had been neutralized, and it *was*. Do we have here a kind of Gordon Davis among poltergeists (Roll, 1974)? Does not the case prove beyond any doubt that as a living agent's mind goes, so goes the poltergeist? Fortunately or unfortunately, this is not so. In the first place, striking poltergeist activity took place when no one was in the M.s' house. Second, there was no obvious origin of the phenomena: was the husband, the wife, or one of the two very young children the agent? The activity failed to point to any one person. Third, if we apply Stevenson's pattern analysis, we find that the activity as a whole points to a discarnate agent rather than a living agent (Stevenson, 1972). Fourth, a local

vicar had performed a (presumably religious) exorcism two years before Cornell was called in, and it too was successful.

Yet the fact remains that the activity ceased from the time that Cornell tricked the M.s. into thinking he had performed an exorcism. *Why*, if the agent was discarnate? I do not know. But, on the other hand, sometimes I do not know why my wife, whom I know very well, does something. If Cornell or other parapsychologists *as a rule* were successful in getting rid of poltergeists by altering the victims' expectations, we would be forced to give up the discarnate agency hypothesis. If this were to happen, however, I would not turn to the living agent hypothesis as the best alternative, for that hypothesis, it seems to me, is glaringly inadequate—we must go much farther out on a limb to make it work in many cases than we would have to go to make the discarnate agency hypothesis work in the lone Cornell case. I strongly suspect, however, that the Cornell case is a fluke; perhaps the parapsychologist's mere *presence*, like the vicar's, called this particular poltergeist to his senses, so to speak, and he left. Or perhaps, as Ava Jacobs believes, a non-living agent requires the subconscious participation of a living co-agent in order to 'borrow' the energy necessary for poltergeist activity; in that case, convincing the living co-agent that something had changed might sometimes have the effect of accomplishing the 'shutting off' of that subconscious relationship. Who knows? In any event, the case, Cornell himself admits, is unique among the five hundred that he and Gauld examined.

Given (1) the law of parsimony and (2) the undeniable inadequacy of the living agent hypothesis to explain all poltergeist phenomena, discarnate agency should be assumed, I feel, in *all* cases. It might seem inelegant, philosophically messy, and a rather prodigal way of accounting for the more pedestrian manifestations of the poltergeist, but it has one enormous advantage over the living agent hypothesis: it explains *all* the phenomena.

Is it time to put the *geist* back into the poltergeist?

*Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
California State College
Bakersfield CA 93309 USA*

Communications have been received direct from Mrs Frances Freeborn and from Luke Cowley (pseudonym) testifying to the essential accuracy of this account as it concerns each of them personally. We also have in our possession documents to show that the author, Dr Betty, is indeed an accredited member of the Faculty of the California State College, Bakersfield. All these documents are available for inspection on request to bona fide researchers.—Editor.

REFERENCES

- Gauld, A., and Cornell, A. D. *Poltergeists*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
 Jacobson, N. *Life Without Death?* London: Turnstone Books, 1974.
 Osis, K., and McCormick, D. A Poltergeist Case Without an Identifiable Living Agent. *JASPR*, 1982, **76**, 23–51.
 Owen, A. R. G. *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* New York: Garrett Publications, 1964.
 Podmore, F. Poltergeists. *ProcSPR*, 1896, **12**, 45–115.
 Roll, W. G. Survival Research: Problems and Possibilities. *Psychic Exploration*, ed. John White. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974.
 Stevenson, I. Are Poltergeists Living or Are They Dead? *JASPR*, 1972, **66**, 233–252.

'Let m
beautiful
the here:
perceptio
anathema:
replaced,
developed

What i
prejudici:
phenome
in that it
based se
communi
other exa
describe j
and perc
(Kanthar
parapsycl
most pars

One ap
but use a
informati
known se
imply tha
sense orga
the term '
possibly i
argue tha
meaning
phenome
Beloff, (1
original
parapsycl
consequel
parapsycl
of its orig

For tho
sory perc
devoid of
non-paraj

* For clar
marks impli

Journal of the Society for Psychical Research

Volume 53 Number 800

June 1985

Psi and Sexuality	<i>Michael K. McBeath</i>	65
Parapsychology and Atomism	<i>Hoyt Edge</i>	78

NOTES

The Kern City Poltergeist: Some Critical Remarks on the Quality of the Evidence and Arguments <i>Gerd H. Hövelmann and George Zorab</i>	87
The Kern City Poltergeist: A Reply to Hövelmann and Zorab <i>L. S. Betty</i>	92
The Kern City Poltergeist: Comments on the Critique by Hövelmann and Zorab <i>Ian Stevenson</i>	96
The Kern City Poltergeist: A Reply to Stevenson <i>L. S. Betty</i>	99

BOOK REVIEWS

<i>Science and Parascience: A History of the Paranormal, 1914-1939.</i> By Brian Inglis <i>Carlos S. Alvarado</i>	100
<i>Survival? Body, Mind and Death in the Light of Psychic Experience.</i> By David Lorimer <i>Karlis Osis</i>	108
<i>Parapsychology and the Unconscious.</i> By Julie Eisenbud <i>John Beloff</i>	111
<i>Explaining the Unexplained: Mysteries of the Paranormal.</i> By Hans J. Eysenck and Carl Sargent <i>Robert L. Morris</i>	115
<i>Deviant Science: The Case of Parapsychology.</i> By James McClenon <i>I. Grattan-Guinness</i>	117
<i>Psi—Was Verbigt Sich Dahinter? Wissenschaftler Untersuchen Parapsychologische Erscheinungen.</i> Edited by E. Bauer and W. von Lucadou <i>I. Grattan-Guinness</i>	119

CORRESPONDENCE

Letters from Georg Hygen, Andrew MacKay, Philip Brand and M. H. Coleman	120
---	-----

NOTICES

127

detail should improved the tergeist cases.

t of possibly ble in which I ist Cases that

disagree with 'simony'. The ply the same al. Fifty years n: ion obviously urbances] are : way, because by discarnate nothing, and unconsciously. s has led some 274-275; my

ested that the consist of two clusively from ality used the believe that all ch simplicity. lity poltergeist gested might rrespondence, nbers of cases an admirable

lical diagnosis of the S. P. R. t obtained the s of cases for

st the study of this branch of flourishing, it onal funds for dence that its earch is still hat is or is not m of Leavett's

Law, which states: 'the authoritative pronouncement that something is definitely established will be immediately followed by evidence to the contrary'.

IAN STEVENSON

*Division of Parapsychology
Box 152 Medical Center
University of Virginia
Charlottesville VA 22908 U.S.A.*

REFERENCES

Flammarion, C. *Les maisons hantées*. Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1923.
Flammarion, C. *La mort et son mystère*. Paris: Editions J'ai Lu, 1978a.
Flammarion, C. *Après la mort*. Paris: Editions J'ai Lu, 1978b.
Gauld, A. and Cornell, A. D. *Poltergeists*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.
Gurney, E., Myers, F. W. H., and Podmore, F. *Phantasms of the Living*. 2 vols. London: Trübner, 1886.
Hoehne, K. A. Classification vs. typology: A difference of practical importance. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1980, **244**, 1099-1100.
Stevenson, I. Are poltergeists living or are they dead? *JASPR*, 1972, **66**, 233-252.

THE KERN CITY POLTERGEIST:

A reply to Stevenson

Stevenson refers to my 'apparent enslavement by the "law of parsimony" '. It is true that I am impressed by this law: I find that it usually works. But it is not infallible and I am not its slave—although I have depended on it rather heavily in my article. In fact, the law of parsimony is only one of two major considerations that have tempted me to take the radical, apparently simplistic approach to interpreting the poltergeist that I defended in my original article. I would like to take this opportunity to sketch, very briefly, the other consideration, which is more basic.

I have long been impressed by the disparity between the rather miserly PK successes in the laboratory and the spectacular RSPK 'successes' in a typical poltergeist outbreak. There is a huge difference between manipulating dice to the point of statistical significance and moving or even lifting heavy furniture. One is a flickering candle, the other a veritable sunburst. On the surface, and from the beginning of my acquaintance with PK phenomena, it has always seemed unlikely that two events differing by such a huge magnitude should be caused by the same thing, namely a psychic discharge from a living person's mind or brain. We consider Nina Kulagina, to take but one case, a psychic superstar because she can move a cigarette on a flat surface with mind-energy alone. Yet how paltry is Kulagina's talent compared to Frances' if we insist that it was Frances who was the poltergeist in the Kern City case. I am simply not willing to believe that the power that enables a superstar like Kulagina to move a miserable cigarette comes from the same place as the power that moves or lifts a heavy piece of furniture in a poltergeist outbreak. If we burden ourselves with the living-agent hypothesis, we are forced to claim that an ordinary, psychically untalented agent

gets possession, for a short period, of a power that surpasses by a quantum leap the power of a recognized psychic superstar. That does not make sense. A prosaic analogy at this point may be helpful. Let us suppose that someone like Geller is legitimate and grant that his power is generated solely by his mind. Let us call him the supreme talent, the greatest genius, the Mozart of psychic ability. Would it not be very strange if untalented, untrained psychic bumpkins like my friend Frances and hundreds of other poltergeist victims (or agents, if you insist) should suddenly start composing psychic music not only equivalent to Mozart's *Requiem*, but vastly superior to it? That, I submit, is not the way the mind works. Something else is going on here. Frances was not, I strongly suspect, the composer. Neither are any of the other targets of poltergeist outbreaks. I am perfectly willing to grant that the human mind, including my own, has a very limited, very narrow PK ability. But I am not willing to grant that for a few weeks of a person's life he may be suddenly gifted with an explosive PK talent, and that this talent is the sole source of the poltergeist. I would just as soon expect a great symphony to come pouring out of my unmusical mind at any minute. Genius does not work that way. Neither, in my opinion, does PK.

There may be mini-poltergeist disturbances that are generated by the living mind alone. For all I know, the ever-so-slight fluttering of the curtain last night in my tightly-shut bedroom may have been caused by the same kind of psychic discharge that makes Kulagina's cigarettes move. My point here, and in my first article, is that the kind of poltergeist outbreaks that are studied, that involve *striking* movement or noise or smells or sounds, are probably not generated by a living agent alone. Moreover—and now it seems necessary to invoke the law of parsimony—they are probably all caused by the same sort or thing: what Stevenson and many others, including myself, call, with good reason (because they seem to be present, possess power, yet are insensible), a discarnate agent.

L. S. BETTY

BOOK REVIEWS

SCIENCE AND PARASCIENCE: A HISTORY OF THE PARANORMAL, 1914–1939 by Brian Inglis. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1984. 382 pp. £12.95. Illustrated.

In a previous book, *Natural and Supernatural*, Brian Inglis surveyed the history of parapsychology up to 1914. The present book, *Science and Parascience*, continues the task limiting its coverage to the 1914–1939 period. As Inglis writes on page 345, another limitation of the book is that it covers only material published in English or French. This qualification, which should have been stated in the introduction to provide a better orientation to the book's content, alerts us to the fact that developments in countries such as Germany and Italy will not be covered in this history unless the relevant material was translated into the above mentioned languages. In reality, then, the emphasis of the book is on England, the United States, and France.

Chapter one, 'The Forerunners', reviews developments prior to and circa 1914 as an introduction to discussions of events after that date. Topics such as the work of the SPR and the mediumship of D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino, Stanislaw Tomczyk, and Eva C. are briefly mentioned.

The second England and the mediums discussed. Th related to Ray made of the cross-corresp Sidgwick, reg

Also includ mediumistic g in Inglis' opi physical phen apparatus . . . experiments d should be poi have some pr Crawford's in research in Er

Here was in the fiel mediums! book [Cr. SPR], bu Eleanor S Crawford is that the

Her an reason fo submittin too far to her taste

In my opini implied that M say on it, and t negative reacti journal. But v review and a unreasonable i use of the me mainly asks t considerations

In chapter t could not look l since even rese effect which th the war years v overlooks impo achievement, h