

A BULLETIN FOR RESEARCH ON THE PROBLEM OF SURVIVAL AFTER BODILY DEATH  
PUBLISHED BY THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION, INC., EDITED BY W. G. ROLL

## POSSESSION; DEMONIAL AND OTHER<sup>1</sup>

By T. K. Oesterreich

Reviewed by Ian Stevenson<sup>2</sup>

The book reprinted in the present edition originally appeared in German in the 1920's and was followed by an English translation which has been scarce for many years. T. K. Oesterreich was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen from 1922 to 1945 with a long interruption during the ascendancy of the Nazis. Anita Gregory has furnished an excellent Introduction to this edition in which she narrates the moving story of Oesterreich's scholarly labors and his sufferings on behalf of liberalism and parapsychology, two unpopular causes in Germany during his productive years at Tübingen.

Oesterreich's book is unique. There simply is no other single volume which surveys the phenomena of possession so extensively. As one reads it one recognizes books or case reports by familiar authors, but Oesterreich summarizes these and goes on to quote still other much less well-known students of possession. Almost everything on the subject is at least alluded to somewhere in this book. The very complete references make it a marvelous guide to almost the entire literature on possession up to 1920.

Oesterreich belonged to the generation of scholars who first broke out of European conceptual prisons to study other cultures and religions systematically. Like the British anthropologist, Sir James Frazer, he collected material from correspondents and other sources all over the world. Oesterreich's omissions are largely due to the deficiencies of the anthropology of his time. His generation handled everything

from their desks. The school of anthropologists who make organized field investigations led by Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and their like was just in its beginnings in those days. Oesterreich could cover no more material than the scholars, travellers, explorers, and the few field anthropologists of his time could give him. He frequently deplores his dependence on "traveller's tales" and at times becomes almost angry at the lack of psychological penetration in people who, on the spot before some dramatic scene of possession, fail to ask the right questions to elicit the answers Oesterreich was seeking. He particularly comments on the paucity of materials from America—both North and South—and deplores this with a conviction, quite proper as it turned out, that the Americas would prove rich grounds for studies of possession. His survey does in fact contain little or nothing about possession in Brazil or Haiti or about shamanism in Alaska. I have not been able to think of any other major deficiency in his coverage of the subject. Oesterreich's materials are particularly complete for his review of spontaneous possession in Europe from ancient to modern times. But other places and times are covered almost as completely; he devotes an entire chapter to a report of shamanism among the little studied Tungus of Siberia. By their range of origin in time and place his citations easily convince the reader of what he himself asserts, that our present era and the Western world are deviant in *not* demonstrating possession abundantly. Possession persists in the West today (or at least is recognized) only in the small enclaves of spiritualistic circles.

What then were the questions Oesterreich wanted answered? After a period of

<sup>1</sup>*Possession; Demoniacal and Other Among Primitive Races, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modern Times.* Translated by D. Ibberson, introduction by Anita Kohsen Gregory. New York: New Hyde Park, University Books, 1966. xxiii + 400 pp., \$10.00.

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skepticism and antagonism towards paranormal explanations of psychical phenomena, he became converted to a belief in the reality of extrasensory perception and also of what we now call psychokinesis. He did not, however, become naively credulous and accept all claims of paranormal phenomena at face value. In his study of possession, Oesterreich first distinguished the syndrome from mental illnesses, such as hysteria, with which casual observers often confuse it. He defined possession as an alteration of consciousness and behavior in which a person claimed (or the claim was made for him) to have undergone a change so that his first personality was replaced by another. (Amnesia for behavior during possession occurs, but is not a rule.) Throughout different ages and in different places the "other personalities" have been represented as being deceased humans, devils, animals, higher spirits, or Gods of various kinds. Oesterreich distinguishes between spontaneous possession, as when a person undergoes a sudden change of personality and acts in a manner quite different from his habitual behavior, and voluntary possession which occurs when a person deliberately induces a state of altered consciousness. The best examples of voluntary possession come from the shamans (and kindred medicine men or clever men) and from the spiritualist mediums who have been particularly studied by parapsychologists.

Oesterreich's book is largely a compendium of case histories. Interpretive material is rather austere. The modesty of the author and his craving for more information properly restrained his speculative tendencies. One can, however, discern implicitly Oesterreich's attitude towards the nature of possession even where he does not clearly state this. In the first place, despite his own efforts at stricter definition, he was perfectly well aware that a variety of conditions were called by the name "possession" so that he did not expect any one explanation to account for all alleged cases of possession. He endeavored to assess the various merits of each case independently. His discussion of the oracle at Delphi provides an excellent example of what we might call paleoparapsychology, the study of ancient cases from contemporary sources. He engages in a lengthy but balanced discussion of whether

or not this oracle was a cleverly managed fraud or a genuine demonstration of paranormal phenomena. On one side of the question he points out that it would be exceedingly difficult for the priests to carry on so successfully over several centuries if they were mere frauds, using the oracle as a front for influencing policy in Greece. There is no question that the oracle enjoyed almost universal respect. On the other hand, if the phenomena were genuine, how could the priests have continued to find suitable subjects to become pythoneses over all these years? (Were they better at finding subjects than modern parapsychologists?) Oesterreich rather discredits, but not completely, the legend that tells of some kind of vapor escaping from a cleft in a rock beneath the pythoneess, which supposedly induced the altered state of consciousness and accompanying paranormal powers. (This legend receives little support from modern attempts to induce or heighten extrasensory perception with drugs, but the legend may stimulate the attempts.)

As I have already indicated, Oesterreich rejected many claims to paranormal phenomena in which the evidence for these was insufficient or in which he could easily see alternative explanations for the supposed exhibition of paranormal powers. At the same time, however, he makes perfectly clear his conviction that the evidence sometimes supported the view that the possessed person really did exhibit paranormal powers.

On the question of whether possessed persons are ever in fact under the influence of discarnate personalities, Oesterreich adopts a much more conservative posture. He clearly believes, as do modern parapsychologists, that one can admit the occurrence of paranormal powers in a person showing a transformation of personality, as do a shaman or a spiritualist medium, without necessarily believing that a discarnate personality has anything to do with the phenomena. Oesterreich does not reject the spiritualist interpretation as obviously foolish. He gives, for example, a very sympathetic summary of the Piper case. He simply thinks the spiritualist interpretation less economical. In this conclusion, Oesterreich impresses me as being "modern" in the sense that most parapsychologists of today would agree with him.

But in another respect he may have been ahead of his time and of ours also. For to Oesterreich the question of the nature of possession was still very much an open

one. Asking questions as he did, he was fairly certain that he did not have the answers. His book is indispensable for those who continue the quest.

## THE WORLD OF TED SERIOS<sup>1</sup>

By Jule Eisenbud

Reviewed by John Artley<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Eisenbud presents an interesting description of two years of work and study with Ted Serios who apparently has the capacity to project images on photographic film in a manner which does not fit normal physical explanations. Approximately thirty persons with responsible positions in academic and professional life are presented as having observed his unusual capacities. Unless blatant fraud is assumed, there seems to be little question as to the parapsychological nature of the phenomena. Eisenbud's candor in discussing his personal involvement as well as the more objective observations make this a highly readable book.

Serios is presented as an unemployed ex-bellboy with a well-developed ego and a need to demonstrate his unusual capacity to "scientists." He appears as a rebel against conventional society who has learned to channel some of his intense energies into the projection of images on photographic film. His rebellion may also be expressed in the manner in which he is apt to vanish from the scene just when a crucial experiment is to be undertaken. Serios has a remarkable capacity for alcohol, which he consumes in great amounts in order to get into the proper condition to influence the camera film. It is apparent that Serios is not above attempting trickery but that controls were normally present which were intended to preclude fraudulent results. In the usual experiments a Polaroid Land Camera is held about arm's length from Serios' face by an experimenter. Serios himself holds up a short cardboard tube called a "gismo" in front of the camera lens and when the proper time is reached he requests that the camera be triggered. Very often, when he is not "hot," there is no image on the film. However,

when the proper conditions exist (whatever they may be), the developed film yields a picture of portions of a building, an automobile, or a scene which does not have an understandable relationship to the objects or the direction in which the camera was pointed.

The function of the gismo is not clear. Eisenbud considers it to be a mere psychological crutch which helps Serios concentrate on the film. In any case, it is always available for inspection by the experimenters and in many instances was made by them. Most of the experiments were performed with small groups of witnesses in informal settings such as the living room of someone's home. The cameras and film were always provided by Eisenbud or the other observers to reduce opportunities for fraud.

The only piece of equipment that was handled by Serios himself was the gismo. Eisenbud points out that fraudulent results could be produced if the gismo were used to conceal a projective device. However, he discounts the possibility that Serios could have done so without discovery. In many experiments several pictures were taken in a short time in a manner which prevented a careful record of all that transpired. When experiments were under way Ted Serios would be given the freedom to "call the shots," which gave him effective control of the manner in which the experiment evolved. Apparently, this freedom was needed to obtain positive results. Attempts were made to predict and control what the images would be but there was little correspondence between images and targets.

The book is written in a narrative style that conveys personal impressions as well as factual material in a manner which might not be to the taste of persons seeking a straightforward presentation of scientific data. It would have been desirable to

<sup>1</sup>New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1967. 367 pp., \$6.50.

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provide the factual and interpretive sides in separate packages. A detailed description of the experimental conditions might also be the best way to still any doubts regarding sleight of hand involving the

gismo and projective devices. In any case, "The World of Ted Serios" as written by Jule Eisenbud provides provocative reading for anyone interested in the exploration of psychical phenomena.

### A SHORT-LIVED HAUNTING

On April 2, 1968, an architect from Alexandria, Virginia, phoned Dr. J. B. Rhine at the Institute for Parapsychology in Durham requesting help in dealing with apparent haunting phenomena that had driven his family from their home. Dr. Rhine invited Mr. W. G. Roll of the Psychical Research Foundation to study the case in collaboration with an Institute member, Mr. W. E. Cox. Both men left for Virginia the same day.

The family, which consented to return home for the investigation, consisted of the parents and six children, ages 6-19. Only the parents and the two oldest children, a boy and a girl of 16 and 19, had the unusual experiences. These first took the form of "motions" observed by the parents in the recreation room and consisting of visual effects that resembled the distortions seen above a heated surface, such as a road on a hot day. On other occasions there were unexplained smells which, however, only the wife experienced repeatedly. One night in March she had a sensation of heat and pressure which lasted for several minutes and prevented her from moving and talking. Later that month the daughter had a slightly similar experience. These experiences were mentioned to the son on March 31 and that same night he had a "seizure" during which he lost consciousness and felt as if he were being invaded by a spirit entity. The next evening, the parents, the three oldest children, and an adult male visitor gathered around the dining room table in the hope of communicating with the entity. This brought on two seizures for the son and one for the daughter, the latter

becoming so violent she had to be held down. The three adults felt that they were on the verge of also losing consciousness and the family became so terrified that they left the house.

Cox and Roll spent their first few hours with the family in the recreation room where the "motions" had been observed. The floor consisted of large black-and-white tiles and the investigators speculated that prolonged exposure to this pattern might produce the visual disturbances that were reported.

After several uneventful hours the visitors suggested that the family reconstruct the events of the previous night and all seated themselves at the table. A 15-year-old son who had not experienced anything unusual but who suffered from lack of sleep and food suddenly clutched his stomach and cried out in an attack of cramps. His sister and brother interpreted this as a spirit seizure and exclaimed that they were feeling the heat and pressure that presaged seizures. Probably they and others around the table would have become fully entranced had the investigators not pointed out that the younger boy only had a stomach ache and that this was the basis on which the others were concocting a ghostly presence. This view was supported by the father. The remainder of the evening was spent relating the onset of the disturbances to family tensions. The members of the family then returned to their rooms which, shortly before, they had refused to enter alone, and went peacefully to sleep. According to recent correspondence, the phenomena have not recurred.

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