

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

A Note on Philippine Possession and Poltergeist

Jaime Bulatao, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 34, no. 1 (1986) 86–101

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

A Note on Philippine Possession and Poltergeist
JAIME BULATAO, S.J.

Only a few hundred years ago people took for granted that the sun revolved around the earth. The sun, they said, rose in the East and set in the West. They said this because they experienced the sun rising and setting and took for granted that the experience and the objective reality must be the same.

Today, we distinguish between the phenomena that we experience and the objective reality, the way things happen in the world of objects. This is not to say the one is real and the other merely hallucination. The fact is that today we still experience sunrise and sunset, but after Einstein, physicists are now extremely hesitant to say that the earth revolves around the sun, as Galileo said. There is a reality to the phenomena quite independent from the underlying explanation. In studying psychic phenomena, it is important to start with the phenomena, precluding assumptions as to their cause, and then try to figure out the reality underlying the phenomena.

PHENOMENON VS. CAUSE

At the beginning, it is important to be clear in our use of the words "possession" and "poltergeist." Each of these words in its common usage contains two aspects in its common meaning among Filipinos:

1. A set of phenomena, i.e., what can be seen, heard, felt, or in some way experienced.

This note is a paper read at the First Philippine International Conference on Paranormal Healing on 29 November 1984 at the Hyatt Terraces Hotel, Baguio City, Philippines.

2. An assumption that these phenomena are manifestations of the presence and action of a spirit.

Thus, a "possessed" appears to act differently from her usual self, as if she were a different person. Her voice may change. She may speak with a new sense of authority, or like a child. She may act violently and uncontrollably, with eyes glazed. She may speak in a strange language or manifest knowledge of things she may not ordinarily have known. All of these are the appearances or phenomena of possession. But in addition is the assumption by neighbors and other observers that the underlying cause for this behavior is that a spirit has entered into her and is speaking and acting in and through her. To be psychologically accurate, one must distinguish between the phenomenon and the explanation for the phenomenon and not confuse the two. When I speak of possession I do not mean to say that there is an unobserved *duende* or devil or saint causing these phenomena. One must put the word "possession" within quotation marks and take it merely to mean "as if" a spirit were in her.

The same holds true for what is called poltergeist activity. The phenomena may include stone-throwing, objects moving, things disappearing and reappearing in unexpected places. These phenomena are attributed by common local belief to spirits, *duende*, or *enkanto*, because it is "as if" invisible spirits were causing the paranormal events. For the sake of clear thinking and until such a time that the assumption of noisy spirits can be proved to be true, it is good to say, "It is *as if* there were such spirits acting." In this note, the word possession is used to mean only the phenomena of possession and the word poltergeist only the phenomena of poltergeists.

The study of spontaneous, irregularly occurring events such as poltergeist phenomena presents difficulties not found in normal or even abnormal psychology. To observe phenomenon systematically, the phenomenon has to be present. In paranormal matters, often, one has to wait for the phenomenon to occur. I believe that we now have in hypnosis an instrument which will allow us to bring paranormal phenomena into the laboratory for study. Hypnosis itself is in need of research but we know that it is much more than mere suggestion. The hypnotic trance is an altered state of consciousness where the mind is somehow freed, "deautomatized" is the word sometimes used, from its learned limitations.

As we gain experience in the use of hypnosis as an instrument we are able to produce more and more efficiently various paranormal phenomena.

How hypnosis facilitates psychic phenomena may be explained by the fact that somehow hypnosis depotentiates the rationalistic, logical aspect of the mind that normally dominates our waking hours. Like the moon in the absence of the sun, the intuitive, subjective aspect of mind comes to the fore. Whatever the explanation may be, it becomes relatively easy under hypnosis to bring out demonstrable powers of mind-reading, telepathy, etc., right in the laboratory.

My methodology, then, has been simply to reproduce through hypnosis the various phenomena that the local people consider paranormal or supernatural. Having produced the trance state or the altered state of consciousness in the laboratory, the state of consciousness can be studied or even varied systematically to produce paranormal results. The assumption of such methodology is that one need not appeal to "spirits" or preternatural entities in an explanation when a simpler, "natural" explanation exists.

POSSESSION

The phenomenon known as "possession" (in Tagalog called *sapi*, *langkap*, or *tuntong*) is quite common. Usually, the possessing spirit is a Catholic saint or the devil or a nature spirit such as *duende*, *enkanto*, *laman lupa*. The possessed person, sometimes called medium, instrument or *kasangkapan* experiences this other reality entering her—and from that moment on there is amnesia until she "wakes up." Meanwhile, observers note the entry into trance and the consequent change in voice and behavior. Here is an example in the exact words (translated from Tagalog) of a first year high school girl:

Friday night (23 November 1984). The class was making a sort of retreat, "overnight with the Lord." At midnight, my classmate all by herself did the "spirit of the mirror." She looked at the mirror for five minutes and asked who would be her future husband. The devil appeared in the mirror. She tried to break the mirror but she could not. The noise awoke her teacher and classmates. Then for six minutes she was dead, really dead. Then she became alive again.

Monday morning she came to class. Her eyes were piercing and her face

was black under the eyes. Her lips were cracked and were dry. Her classmate looked at her in great fear. She seized the classmate by the neck and began to choke her. While choking the classmate, she was crying.

Everyone was shouting. Suddenly all the classroom windows banged shut together with the door. We would hear them even on the floor below. The chairs were being thrown down. The class adviser was crying.

They brought the girl to the clinic or the chapel. They asked her "Are you . . . (her real name)?" She said "No, I am Satan." She began talking in a different kind of language. She said she would see somebody, without a head and wearing a red cape.

I saw her in the clinic. Her eyes were burning. "Don't go near her," she said. They were trying to pin a St. Benedict medal on her. Her voice was frightful. Her personality was changed. She was violent. All her hair was standing on end while she was shouting.

On the way home, she was behind me. I was scared. But she was already o.k. then.

The students were terribly scared. They stood together in groups. In the canteen the teacher saw her. But only the teacher could see her. The others could not.

Even the first floor heard the second floor. The shouting. The windows and the doors banging shut all together. No one closed them.

Why was she crying while choking her classmate? Her classmate also was crying.

This account by a thirteen-year old girl brings out well the cultural definition of possession, what it is believed to be and how the possessed person acts seemingly against her will (choking the other girl and crying at the same time). In addition are the paranormal phenomena resembling poltergeist activity of window banging and doors closing by themselves.

To reproduce the phenomenon of possession by hypnosis is relatively simple. One method consists merely of putting an entire class of volunteers into hypnosis, giving them half an hour to deepen the trance while developing the new identity and then to "awaken" them in the new identity.

In one such class, the students became possessed by the following spirits (in the order of appearance): Jose Rizal, Imelda Marcos, Ramon Magsaysay, Ferdinand Marcos.

First, Imelda tried to invite Jose Rizal to the Manila International Film Festival, but Rizal was reluctant. Then, Ramon Magsaysay, while gesturing by beating his right thigh with his right hand, began to speak on, "What a pity, this New Society. The Philippines was doing so well until it came."

Then came an angry voice from the back, "Would you rather go to Iran"? It was Ferdinand Marcos speaking. The whole session lasted an hour and there was no memory of the drama among the actors after the event.

An interesting aftermath of the above incident: when the granddaughter of the real Ramon Magsaysay was asked if her grandfather did have such a gesture as striking his right thigh to emphasize a point, she confirmed it absolutely. The person who had been possessed by the spirit of Ramon Magsaysay was only a baby when Ramon Magsaysay died in an airplane crash.

On another occasion, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, possessed a girl, who then gave a very moving speech on the suffering children of the world. The class then asked Mother Teresa to heal three or four persons in the class who were suffering various pains at the moment. She laid her hands on their heads and the pains disappeared. The girl who had been possessed by Mother Teresa came out of her trance with no memory of what happened during the trance itself.

Reflecting on these class experiments in possession, one can note that the phenomena of possession were there. And yet the spirits of the dead were not necessarily involved because some of the so-called possessing spirits were living persons: Mother Teresa, Ferdinand Marcos, Imelda Marcos. We can best say that the experience of being possessed was a hallucination: an image in the mind seemed to become another person who then took control over the so-called possessed person.

But what of Magsaysay's gesture? Perhaps this may have been an example of something like telepathy. In the state of trance, persons do have the ability to identify with someone else by some kind of super empathy. This could be the paranormal aspect tapped by the state of consciousness called "trance."

ESP as a good explanation of seemingly supernatural knowledge in possessed persons can be demonstrated by producing both the trance and the ESP in the psychological laboratory. One such demonstration was done thus:

Two subjects were seated back to back and were put in deep hypnotic trance. While in trance, they were instructed to "possess" each other by entering mentally into the other's body. They were, thus, to have one mind and to conceive one image. After a few minutes, they were awakened

and were told separately to draw the image they had conceived while in trance. Their drawings are reproduced in Figures 1 and 2. Note the tower or monument at a crossroads, the archer and the prison(s). The artistic differences merely heighten the remarkable coincidences of both drawings.

These drawings which were randomly chosen from a collection of experimental results at the Ateneo Experimental Psychology Laboratory, illustrate well the liberating power of trance to let the mind function at a different level of reality. This is the paranormal level found in ordinary possession and in the simulated possession by hypnosis.

If it is possible by means of hypnosis to get someone to be possessed, it should also be possible to unpossess by the same means a so-called possessed person. This, as a matter of fact, is what we now regularly do in the psychological clinic. Persons who are considered to be possessed by spirits are referred by their relatives or even parish priests. The process of hypnotic "exorcism" has been described elsewhere.¹ In brief, the method consists of putting the person in trance, talking to the inhabiting "spirit" and persuading him to go away. Actually, one is speaking to the person's personalized subconscious (that has split off from the conscious self) but the formality of "spirit" is still used because it is the language understood by the patient. One always works within the patient's thought system to be more effective.

The therapist listens to the subconscious as it speaks its own symbolic language. "Being possessed by a spirit" is itself symbolic language for a strong feeling that seems to obsess one's inner life, a feeling of fear or anger or guilt or a strong wish for power or freedom. For instance, the girl who became possessed by the devil in the mirror was in great fear and guilt for daring to violate a cultural injunction against playing with the Spirit of the Mirror. In another instance, a woman felt that she was carrying a curse but did not know what it was or from where it came. Clinical insight (or ESP) made the therapist say to her: "You are always contradicting your mother and even before she has finished speaking you have already taken the opposite side." She said, "True." Then she went on in great pain to say how her father had died when she was twelve, how her mother wanted to remarry but at the children's

1. Cf. my article "Local Cases of Possession and their Cure," *Philippine Studies* 30 (1982): 415-25.

objections gave up the idea of remarriage and ever since then mother and daughter had been at odds with each other. That was the curse. The therapist then proceeded to remove the curse through mutual forgiveness in an altered state of consciousness.

In many instances, it is not even necessary to understand explicitly the dynamics of the patient's situation. It is sufficient to talk to the spirit telling him it is now time to go. Often, the departure of the spirit is accompanied by vomiting on the part of the patient. Again, it is the symbolic expression of removal of an unwanted subjective reality from the inner life of the patient.

In the clinic, many if not most of the patients who ask for help say that they are possessed or are under a curse. Some suffer from chronic pains that the doctor cannot explain or remove. Some have seemingly neurological convulsions, some are paralyzed or in some way incapacitated. The response is generally to take the facts as stated and to go along with explanations given. In a deep trance, they experience in their own way the possessing spirit or what the spirit is doing. The therapist talks to the spirit and if it is a good spirit, asks him to heal the patient in his own way, or if it is a bad spirit, asks him to go away.

The human subject is somewhat like an orchestra: the self, the *ako*, is the conductor and under the self are many sub-selves, like orchestra members, more or less under the control of and cooperating with the conductor. A sub-self is really a bundle of closely associated images, thoughts, feelings, action tendencies, etc., which have a certain unity and organization of their own. Maybe they center around the feelings of a particular stage in one's childhood, or around an object of devotion like the Blessed Virgin Mary, or around fearful characters from stories of childhood such as *ingkanto*, *kapre*, *aswang*. These association clusters may assume a semi-independent life of their own within the person. That is why they are called sub-selves.

Sometimes, one of these sub-selves gains ascendancy and takes over the functions of the conductor-self. The subject is then said to be possessed. As a matter of fact, it is not an outsider who takes over the subject's personality temporarily but a part of oneself, a sub-self. Sometimes different sub-selves take turns at playing conductor. It is then that there may be a succession of entering personalities: Santo Niño, Mother of Perpetual Help, San Martin de Porres, Divina Pastora, etc.

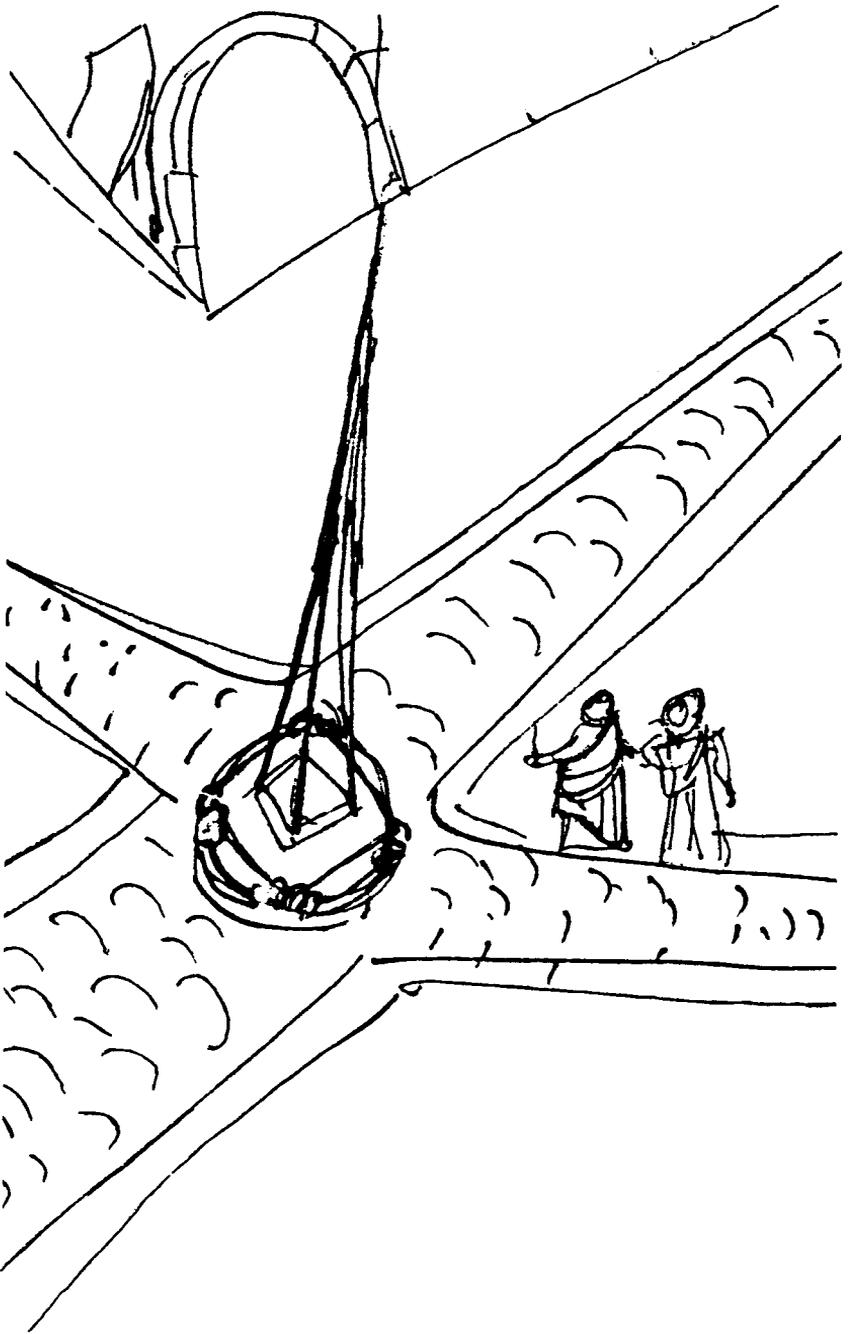


Figure 1

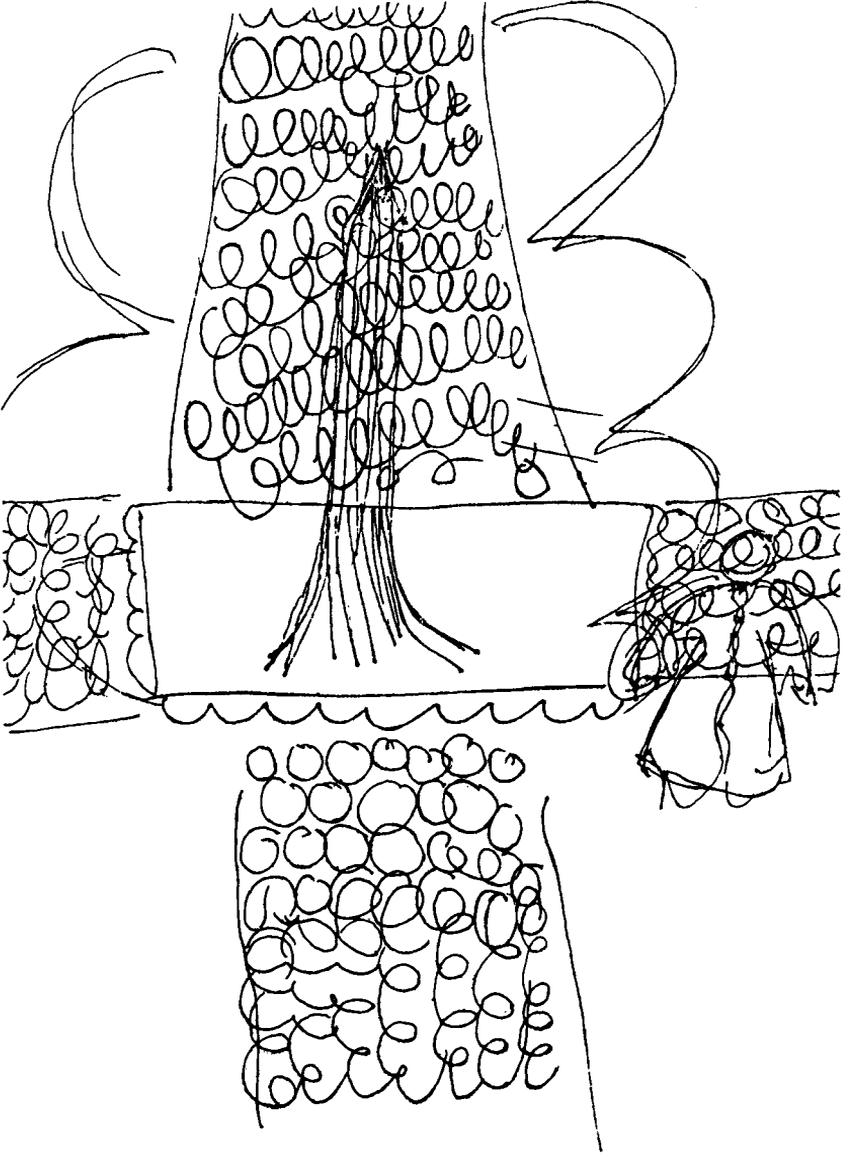


Figure 2

Sometimes the original self remains in the background observing the parade of these sub-personalities. At other times it seems to go away completely, and after the whole show no conscious memory remains of what happened. But if the subject is hypnotized, he will remember everything that happened.

POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA

Up to now, we have been dealing with possessions, which are very common in the Philippines probably because of our own animist background. So common are they that they do not merit to be called abnormal phenomena, and were it not for the unusual power of ESP and healing that they sometimes manifest, might not be called paranormal. But we now come to a very interesting phenomenon which I maintain to be related to possession, but with altogether spectacular and dramatic effects, namely, the poltergeist. Whereas the drama of the possessed mainly occurs within the person, the poltergeist person acts it all out and fills the house with flying pots and pans and crashing coke bottles.

Once more, at the beginning, one must distinguish between the phenomenon (what is observed) and its interpretation, namely that it is the spirit, called poltergeist, which is behind the phenomenon. What can be observed in a poltergeist happening?² I have observed and investigated seven or eight such happenings. Here is a typical case which occurred in the year 1980 in a house in Kamuning, Quezon City:

An emergency call brought me to the house where everything was in a mess. The food on the table was covered with sand. There were stones on the floor which had been thrown with great force from inside the house. The windows were closed but a jalousie had been broken outward, i.e., the stone had hit it from inside the closed room. A child's pail had been filled with water, a stone and a dead mouse.

These events had occurred in the presence of a 12 year-old maid who had recently arrived from Samar and "whatever had thrown the stone had followed her to Quezon City."

I hypnotized her and put her in contact with the five *ingkanto* with her. We offered them a house, first a shoebox then a bigger box, on condition

2. Let me refer the reader to an article on my first such encounter. See Jaime Bula-
tao, S.J., "A Poltergeist in Quezon City," *Philippine Studies* 16 (1968): 178-88.

that they stopped bothering the family. They accepted with the added condition that they be given lunch everyday.

Things quieted down. Five plates were set up for them at lunch. On two of the plates, rice was seen to come from the rice bowl at the center. The maid said only two *ingkanto* had come because the other three had returned to Samar. Two days later her father fetched her back to Samar and all contact with her was broken.

Here is another example in Dasmariñas Village in 1982:

Besides other weird happenings such as voices heard by several people in the absence of a visible speaker, soft drink bottles would float in from the pile of empty soft drink bottles in the yard, go through the kitchen door at about two feet above the floor and crash on the kitchen floor.

I taught the son of the house how to use dowsing rods to get a "yes" or "no" answer. We then found out that the *duende* wanted a house in the garden. The family agreed, built them a small toy house and the signs of haunting disappeared.

At this point in my experience with poltergeists, I was struck by the similarities between the possession and the poltergeist phenomena. Both seemed *as if* there were intelligent beings, spirits, in action, the one inside and the other outside the person most immediately concerned. Both seemed to be expressions on the symbolic level. There was a childish tinge to both, expressions of a child using signs rather than words.

The spirits followed the culturally determined roles assigned to them, i.e., saints, nature spirits, etc., and both sets of spirits could be controlled through hypnosis of the central person concerned.

I therefore concluded, especially from the last fact that the so-called spirits at work were really a subconscious aspect of the person most closely concerned with the phenomena. In other words, if I could through hypnosis directly modify these phenomena or make them stop, they were not supernatural at all but were of the same order of reality as hypnosis itself, natural, mental, subconscious.

Another series of poltergeist happenings lasting over a year seemed to confirm this thinking that possession and poltergeist are really one and the same reality with different expressions.

A husband and wife called for my help against spirits who were haunting their house. Things like money, pictures, false teeth, etc, would disappear and would reappear in unexpected places, except the money. While

the husband was sitting in the toilet, he would be hit by a flying perfume bottle. While the children were watching television, the telephone would float in the air above the cradle. Everyone in the house was so scared that it was impossible that anyone in the house could be playing a joke. The happenings seemed to center around the wife.

When the two came to my office, I put the wife under hypnosis and she began to talk Karay-a (a language of the island of Panay, the native tongue of the wife) in the person and voice of a *duende*. Through question and answer we learned that they were five *duende* who were living in the house and were just having fun. They agreed to help the family in return for being allowed to stay. Thus did a series of conversations begin. Every time the family wished to speak to the *duende* they would come to my office and would have a conversation with them. There were several noteworthy occurrences.

Once the wife appeared in my office with only one shoe. She was positive she had entered the car with a pair of shoes on and they had searched the car and found nothing. I said to the wife, "Look in your handbag." She looked and found the missing shoe.

Another time they were at home and heard sounds of laundry washing coming from the bathroom. They found the house linen washed but not yet rinsed. The husband said, "It would be better if you finished the job." They closed the bathroom door and a short time later they found the linen all rinsed.

Another time they came to my office with the following story. The jewel in the wife's ring had come loose so they placed it in an envelope and placed the envelope in the filing case. The jewel disappeared and so the two became very angry at the *duende* whom they blamed for stealing. I told the *duende* to return the jewel and the *duende* promised to return it. When the couple reached home they laid the ring (minus the jewel) on the dressing table for just a few minutes when it disappeared. Again they became more angry. But that afternoon the ring with the jewel encrusted appeared on the bed on top of the pillow.

I have included this last case inspite of its length because it was here that the connection between possession and poltergeist phenomena became manifest. Clearly, the hypnotic trance was an artificially controlled phenomenon and yet it was the immediate occasion for change in the behavior of the so-called *duende*. The same was true in the previous cases: the poltergeist activity was stopped through communications with a subject under hypnotic trance. One must conclude, then, that it is the mind of the subject that is causing the poltergeist phenomena even without her consciously willing them.

The hypnotist dealing with these phenomena is conscious that he is the one facilitating the entry of the subject into the hypnotic state and his help, as in the last case, becomes a necessary condition for the trance. Just as in the cases of so-called possession, it is his action through the subject's altered state of consciousness that brings about relief, so also in the poltergeist phenomenon, it is his action upon the subject's consciousness that controls the so-called poltergeist. In other words, both the possession phenomenon and the poltergeist phenomenon are phenomena brought about by and in the subject's consciousness, but which may have physical effects on the subject's environment.

TWO WORLDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

To understand these matters, let us create a theory of the two consciousnesses. Theory, they say, is explanatory fiction. But if it helps us put order among a confusion of facts, it may be a step towards scientific understanding.

If we analyze consciousness carefully, we can discover two qualitatively distinct consciousnesses. The first has to do with the object-world of reality. It objectifies everything it perceives, people, places and things. It thinks on them, reasons about them, solves problems concerning them. It is much concerned with survival in the world of objects. To give it a name, we call it the objective mind.

Even at this moment while you are reading, there is another consciousness within you that may be reacting in its own way of interest or unease or may even be wandering off to a pleasant experience.

We can call this the subjective mind. Out of deference to the old Chinese philosophers who created the Yin and the Yang, we also call these minds Day Consciousness and Night Consciousness.

The subjective mind goes by "feel" rather than by objective conceptualization. It is artistic and emotional and is not at all scientific. It learns by empathy and by relating to another, to the point of identifying with the other. While the objective mind emphasizes observation, the subjective mind seeks experiences. It is the stuff that mystics are made of, and it may be the reason why mystics are considered "out of this world."

Typically, the objective mind like the sun dominates the sub-

jective mind as the sunlight hides the moon and the stars. But the moon and the stars are there anyway, and when the sun goes down they take their rightful place in the sky. So, too, in trance, whether induced spontaneously or through hypnosis, the objective mind withdraws to the background and allows the subjective mind freedom to function.

The subjective mind emerges from its deep recesses but in the absence of objects cannot communicate with other minds. To communicate with itself even reflexively, it is forced to borrow images, left-overs from the world of objects, and it shapes and combines these to suit its own subjective purpose. It thus speaks a language of its own, which the objective mind despises as absurd. For instance, this subjective mind may speak of duende, unified field, sermons by St. Michael the Archangel, chakras, spirit-guides, vibrations, etc., etc., and the objective mind can only laugh at these things that it cannot observe, not knowing that the subjective mind is referring to a reality quite different from what the words primarily mean in objective language.

Thus when the mystics of Mt. Banahaw claim that the Holy Land has been transferred from the Middle East to the top of Mt. Banahaw, they refer to a truth of experience. The objective historical and geographical mind cannot but think their claims to be absurd. Only when these historians and geographers experience the inner wonders of the holy mountain will they understand the phrase: "The Holy Land has been transferred to the top of Mt. Banahaw."

Practitioners of the occult or of mysticism also make the same mistake when in their desire to be accepted by science, they insist on the literal objective reality of their experience. They speak of healing vibrations that can be measured by Kirlian photography, of chakras in the human body, of astral bodies and astral travels. As long as they realize that these terms refer to a reality of their own experience, that there is something true in what they say but not necessarily true in the literal objective sense and that therefore they should use double quotations for such terms as "energy," "vibration," etc., they can be accepted.

Trance-language, then, is mostly analogical or symbolic. Like the objects seen in a crystal ball, there is a need of translation from crystall ball language into objective world language. To mistake the symbol for the literal meaning is an error committed by

many practitioners of the occult, as has happened to many cults who have prophesied the specific day of the end of the world and have been disappointed.

Trance-language, then, means that deep thoughts and feelings of the subjective mind have been translated into an experience. These are the sub-selves we have been speaking about which are experienced like a "possessing spirit." The words, too, of this so-called spirit must be understood not as objective but as subjective communications originating from deep inside the subject's subconscious being expressed in semi-objective language.

The subjective mind, thus borrows images from the objective world to express its meanings. But more than that, since we have seen how the hypnotist can control poltergeist phenomena working indirectly through the subject's subjective mind, there must be some physical influence which this subjective mind exercises on physical reality.

Psychokinesis has been proven to be a genuine phenomenon, not just fraud or hallucination. One has only to read the scientific journals of the last ten years. One must say, thus, that the subjective mind is at a level of reality where it can contact and affect physical reality in somewhat the same way as the traditional concept of "soul," spirit though it is, is capable of lifting an all-too-material human hand. In other words, the subjective mind, the night consciousness, even without awareness of the day consciousness, can express itself by throwing stones, scattering pots and pans, breaking Coca-Cola bottles. It can help lift market bags, do laundry, reset loose ring-stones, and do those other weird things that happen to certain people.

That it is the subjective mind that performs these actions is a conclusion from the fact that the hypnotist can put a halt to these actions in the same way he can put a halt to the phenomenon of possession. We, then, came to the conclusion that it is the subjective mind that is under both sets of phenomena. The difference between the two sets is that in possession, the phenomena occur primarily as an experience within the person while in the poltergeist situation, the phenomena occur mainly outside the person even while their subconscious source is from within.

CONCLUSION

From the earliest times, man has been concerned with the question, "What is reality"? During the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth, many men of science assumed a materialistic view of reality, reducing the universe to a grand machine. Then came the Einstein revolution that came as a shock to many, teaching that mass is energy, and that the solid chairs we sit on are not as solid as we once thought. Today, the psychic phenomena that we see around us, the ESP, the psychic healing, the poltergeist phenomena, may be leading us to a new view of reality. This view sees mind at work in the midst of physical reality. Physical reality takes on a new congruence with mind. We are on the verge of a new breakthrough in our understanding of reality.