

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY

### COMMENTS ON *MEN AND WOMEN OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS*

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Autobiography is an old literary genre. Examples of it may even be found in the ancient world (Misch, 1907/1951). This type of biography is particularly valuable because it presents a story from the point of view of its main participant, thus giving a unique perspective on the topic. In doing this, the writer examines his or her personal identity and shows a willingness for disclosure and exploration of the self. (For a discussion along these lines, see Kohli, 1981.)

The insider's perspective provided by autobiographical accounts can be very useful in helping us understand the life and work of some individuals, as well as the development of ideas and fields of study. Abbott (1987) has argued that the autobiographical writings of persons such as Jane Addams, Benjamin Franklin, and Malcolm X provide a better perspective on the American political liberal tradition than do other sources of information because this tradition is basically an expression of the inner self, and autobiography allows a fuller expression of the self than other literary devices. Likewise, the autobiographies of scientists such as Charles Darwin (F. Darwin, 1892/1958, pp. 5-58) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1905) are useful in that they present important information about the development of ideas concerning biological evolution, as well as insight on aspects of the life of some nineteenth-century British scientists (e.g., their early education, scientific training, travels, opinions on particular figures or controversial incidents).

Autobiography in parapsychology has appeared in the form of books (e.g., L. E. Rhine, 1983), book chapters (e.g., Lodge, 1931/1932, pp. 270-313), and articles (e.g., Murphy, 1957).<sup>1</sup> For years one of the best biographical sources of information for the early intellectual development of James H. Hyslop was an unpublished

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<sup>1</sup>There is much useful autobiographical archival material. Additionally, interviews with parapsychologists (e.g., Giovetti, 1984) and publications based on personal experiences (e.g., Carrington, n.d.) may be considered, at least in part, as autobiographical writings. I will not be concerned here with publications written by psychics or mediums (e.g., Garrett, 1939).

autobiographical fragment kept in the archives of the American Society for Psychical Research. (This document has recently been published and annotated by Anderson, 1986.) The same may be said of Frederic W. H. Myers's (1893/1961) autobiography. Myers not only presented biographical information not available elsewhere but he also put his interest in psychical research in the context of his religious and intellectual life and the religious and intellectual development of Victorian society. Such perspectives have been invaluable sources of information for later historians attempting to reconstruct the past.

There has been a recent trend toward the publication of autobiographies in parapsychology. In addition to the works of Blackmore (1986) and McConnell (1987), the Italian parapsychology journal *Metapsichica* has started publishing autobiographies of Italian parapsychologists (e.g., Biondi, 1985) and plans to include in future essays individuals from other countries. The volume reviewed here, *Men and Women of Parapsychology: Personal Reflections*, edited by Rosemarie Pilkington, is part of this trend.<sup>2</sup> However, it differs from previous publications in that it represents the first effort to systematically collect autobiographies in parapsychology in book form.

The book includes twelve individuals from different countries. These twelve were selected because they were over 65 years of age and because they had been active in parapsychology most of their lives. They are, in order of appearance, Jule Eisenbud, Montague Ullman, Jan Ehrenwald, Eileen Coly, Joseph H. Rush, Gertrude R. Schmeidler, Emilio Servadio, Renée Haynes, Hans Bender, Karlis Osis, George Zorab, and Bernard Grad. Both Coly and Servadio were interviewed by Pilkington. The rest wrote their essays in response to five guiding points given to them by the editor of the volume: (1) how they became interested and involved in parapsychology; (2) what they consider was their most important contribution to the field; (3) what things they would have done in a different way, or what beliefs were changed through their work in the field; (4) what experiences they had that exceeded their "boggle threshold"; (5) what advice they would give to newcomers in the field. The editor appended at the end of each essay or interview a bibliography of the individual's publications. Unfortunately, many references are incomplete (i.e., missing page numbers of articles in journals), and it is not stated that they are not complete bibliographies. This may mislead newcomers and even some parapsychologists as to

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<sup>2</sup>Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987, pp. viii + 173, \$25.00.

the rate and periods of publication of the persons included in this book.

Considering the recent interest in writings on the participation of women in the scientific enterprise (e.g., Harding & O'Barr, 1987), it is good to see that at least three women were included in the book, although one wishes there were more. Among other women deserving to be included in a work like this are Kathleen Goldney, Dorothy R. Martin, Elizabeth A. McMahan, Marian Nester, Betty Humphrey Nicol, and Dorothy H. Pope.<sup>3</sup> Jelinek (1980) has pointed out that autobiographies written by males and females differ in that the males are outwardly oriented (e.g., they are concerned with influences on others and professional success) whereas women are more inwardly oriented (e.g., concerned with personal aspects and inner circles such as the family). Although the women in Pilkington's book form only twenty-five percent of the total of individuals included, I think that they show some of the patterns described by Jelinek. In my opinion Coly, Haynes, and Schmeidler paid more attention in their recollections to personal and family matters of their life than did the men in the book. If this is the case, and considering some feminist theories of the way women differ from men in the process of conceptualizing scientific problems (for a review, see Harding, 1986), autobiographies may offer a unique perspective for studying such issues.

I am also glad that Pilkington did not limit her book to individuals known for their experimental work. Although experimentation is the dominant approach in the field, a representative survey of the field's personalities should include, as Pilkington has, areas such as field studies (i.e., Bender), psychiatric approaches (e.g., Eisenbud, Ehrenwald), funding and publishing (i.e., Coly), and commenting and journal editing (i.e., Haynes).

It is interesting to notice that most of the contributors to this volume had experiences with psychic phenomena early in their lives. For example, Eisenbud said that his mother seemed to be able to guess his father's thoughts on occasion, and that he had a dream that conveyed the news about the death of a distant cousin (p. 8). Others, such as Bender, Haynes, Osis, and Ullman, had early encounters with the paranormal before entering the field of parapsychology. Coly's story is particularly interesting in that she was exposed through most of her life to the phenomena of her mother,

<sup>3</sup>In justice to Pilkington, it must be said that she states in the preface of the book that not everyone she invited to participate in the project chose to do so. Perhaps some of those who declined include the women mentioned here.

the medium Eileen Garrett, and to her mother's investigators. Although this is not a representative sample of parapsychologists, the mention of early psychic experiences is consistent with the findings of more representative surveys regarding the high proportion of spontaneous experiences as a motivational factor for the acceptance of psychic phenomena and involvement in the field among parapsychologists (Gavilán Fontanet, 1978; McConnell & Clark, 1980).

The contributors to the volume (and those interviewed) present interesting comments on well-known research and phenomena. This is the case of Eisenbud's work with Ted Serios (p. 15), Ullman's dream telepathy work (p. 28), Coly's recollection of the Ash Manor ghost case (pp. 52-53), Schmeidler's early sheep-goat studies (p. 78), and Osis's distance ESP tests (pp. 124-126). But the essays also provide "new" information of great human and historical interest. For example, although it is generally assumed that Schmeidler was introduced to parapsychology by Gardner Murphy, Schmeidler herself says that she first became interested in the field by reading J. B. Rhine's (1934) first book. In 1935 she conducted an experiment about the production of body movements in distant persons through psi means. It was after conducting this experiment that Schmeidler had contact with Murphy (pp. 76-77). Other interesting items of information are Zorab's early belief in survival of death (p. 138) and Grad's contact with Wilhelm Reich and his concept of orgone energy. This contact and Grad's report of a type of spontaneous phenomena that he described as "bioenergetic experiences" (p. 148) provide a logical context for the development of his interest in psychic healing.

It is difficult to criticize these essays in terms of emphasis and omission because they are personal impressions and reminiscences, not reviews of the literature or of the complete life work of these individuals. Also, they are attempts to respond to Pilkington's five basic questions. These questions produced interesting essays that will be of use to students of the history and sociology of the field, as well as to outsiders and newcomers to parapsychology interested in the insider's view of parapsychology. However, I would argue that some of the guiding questions may present problems and that there are areas that could have been included in the questions to make the responses more interesting and valuable from the point of view of students of the development of parapsychology as a discipline.

The second guiding question, about what the authors felt their most important contributions to the field had been, is an interesting

one. The responses to it allow the reader to see how these persons evaluate the importance of aspects of their work years after it was conducted. Such insight is valuable in that it provides information about the person's intellectual development by chronicling changes of opinion and opinions that have remained unchanged throughout the years. Unfortunately, questions like this may focus the autobiographical account on aspects generally considered to have been successful or still considered to be so by contemporary standards. This could bias the historical record because the material in question would not have been evaluated on the basis of its contemporary context but according to later developments. In this view the present is not only a product of successes but also of failures and ideas discarded today as wrong, irrelevant, superstitious, or outdated. I cannot say for sure if this bias affected the essays of Pilkington's anthology, but it is a problem that should be kept in mind when asking someone to write an autobiography, and in evaluating one.

Another issue of importance is that of interpersonal and institutional relations. Who or what influenced the figures in this book? The recent interest in social history and studies of science (including citation analyses exploring networks of information) bears witness to the importance of having information about the persons, communities, and institutions that a particular person has been in contact with. For example, Eisenbud (p. 12) and Ullman (pp. 24–25) mentioned the medical section of the ASPR. Not only did they provide information about the ASPR's history, but at the same time they acknowledged that their discussions with each other and with other figures in the group (e.g., Gardner Murphy, Jan Ehrenwald) were important in their intellectual development. The same may be said of Osis's description of his work at Duke University's Parapsychology Laboratory (p. 123) and Zorab's contact and activities with spiritualist organizations and publications (p. 139).

It is also important to see the social interactions outside parapsychology.<sup>4</sup> Schmeidler wrote that her early sheep-goat ESP studies were conducted "with a good part of the Harvard Psychology Department looking over my shoulder" (p. 78). She said that she had contact with important psychologists such as Woodworth, who invited her to use the psychology laboratory of Columbia University, and Allport, who invited her to work with him at Harvard in a pro-

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<sup>4</sup>Standard biographical sources tend to ignore or minimize an individual's involvement in psychical research whereas biographical material in parapsychology tends to neglect work conducted outside parapsychology. At best, this tends to produce incomplete accounts; at worst, a story out of context.

ject of civilian morale and the war (p. 77). A similar situation is Ehrenwald's contact with neurologist Otto Poetzl (p. 42), and Grad's contact with psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich (pp. 148-149). One can only speculate about how much they were influenced by these personal and professional contacts, but it should be recognized that an understanding of their careers requires a study of factors such as these. Although there are several mentions of these issues in the autobiographies, I wish Pilkington had included this aspect as part of her guiding questions because this might have brought forward more information on personal interactions and more details on those mentioned in the essays. The interview with Servadio is particularly open to criticism in this respect. Servadio's responses are detailed and to the point, but Pilkington lost here an opportunity to explore Servadio's interactions with other parapsychologists. He has been active in the field since the 1920s, but no attempt was made to explore his contacts with, or studies of, the writings of figures such as William Mackenzie and Ernesto Bozzano.

A similar point may be made about work conducted in areas other than parapsychology. For example, to understand Grad's interest in, and approach to, psychic healing, we should have information about his work in biochemistry and experimental morphology. Connecting links explaining theoretical orientations and methodological approaches may be found between seemingly disparate activities. Unfortunately most of the essays do not mention nonparapsychological work—or refer to it only in passing.

Until now I have emphasized the usefulness of autobiography, but something should be said also about its limitations (for a review see Pascal, 1960). In accordance with Allport (1942), a list of problems could include lack of objectivity, self-deception, outright deception, oversimplification, and memory errors. Whenever possible, autobiographical memory should be checked against other sources of information (e.g., publications, archival material). Important distortions and omissions may be found when this is done. Trevor H. Hall has argued that the autobiographical writings of Ada Goodrich-Freer and Harry Price have countless inaccuracies, which he attributes to intentional deception (Campbell & Hall, 1968; Hall, 1978). Ernesto Bozzano (1924) omitted from an autobiographical sketch significant events that led to his convictions concerning the reality of psychic phenomena, such as a mediumistic communication in which he thought he was in contact with his deceased mother (Iannuzzo, 1983, pp. 23-24).

In the evaluation of autobiographical recollections, it has generally been recognized that distortions and inaccuracy in the interpre-

tation of memories are an important variable to keep in mind. Helen Keller showed awareness of the unreliability of autobiographical memory when she wrote in her own autobiography: "When I try to classify my earliest impressions, I find that fact and fancy look alike across the years that link the past with the present" (Keller, 1902/1954, p. 23). In McVaugh's (1984) view, memory tends to produce salient occurrences filled with controversy and excitement instead of common daily events; "it favors a view of the past as revolution and confrontation rather than as evolution, adaptation, and compromise" (p. 258). Research on autobiographical memory has shown that people sometimes recall personal incidents as part of groups or clusters of events. This cognitive strategy may interfere with recollection of specific time periods in which events occurred and with more general recollections such as the frequency of specific actions or events. Additionally, some experiments have suggested that when subjects cannot remember something they will answer questions by extrapolating from fragmentary information (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987). These findings suggest caution before accepting at face value accounts of events and personal experiences presented in autobiographies.<sup>5</sup>

Another problem is the potential distortions when the mindset of an adult is used to interpret childhood's experiences. Coe (1984) suggests that an adult recollecting his or her childhood cannot capture the perspective of a child because children have a different perspective of life, a different logic from that of adults. In this view, adult interpretations of childhood are an imposition of motives or needs that may not reflect the reality of the child's world. A possible example of this problem is Zorab's opening statement in his essay: "When I was eight years old I was terrified to die. I was so afraid that I didn't dare to fall asleep, for falling asleep—so I thought—was the same as dying, which meant to me losing one's identity and sinking away into nothingness" (p. 138). Is this a reflection of an eight-year-old child or of a psychologically sophisticated adult looking back and interpreting his life in the light of his later experiences and ideas?

Many of these problems are relevant not only to autobiography but also to biography and history at large, as well as to other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. The historian's and

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<sup>5</sup>Most of these studies are experiments with survey-type questions. Even though their results may be relevant to the responses to Pilkington's questions, it is not clear whether experimental results of this type may be generalized to autobiography in general. See Johnson and Hasher (1987, pp. 653-654) for a further review of research on autobiographical memory.

biographer's choice of examples and events to include in writing is, to some extent, as subjective as that of an autobiographer. Everyone has biases and guiding principles leading to the selection of certain events, quotes, and sources, over others. As Bertraux (1984) has stated regarding the role of memory in the study of the past: "Memory . . . is not like playing a prerecorded tape. It is an act of interpretation, of reconstructing the past from the present point of view. But so is history after all . . . . We all are interpreters, whether historians, psychoanalysts, or behavioral and social scientists" (p. 191).

But regardless of all these problems, it cannot be denied that essays like the ones compiled by Pilkington have much to offer students who are interested in the development of parapsychology and the life histories of its participants. It is to be hoped that other volumes will follow the present one. The field has many persons deserving to appear in such publications. Some examples, besides the women already mentioned (e.g., Betty Humphrey Nicol, Dorothy H. Pope), are persons like Piero Cassoli, C. T. K. Chari, Carroll B. Nash, Ian Stevenson, and Robert Tocquet. Hopefully, these, and other potential contributors will take time to reflect and write on their life and work in parapsychology. Contributions of this sort are sometimes more inspiring and influential than any research project. They have the advantage of depicting the human dimension of a research field, thus showing the role of social and psychological variables in the scientific enterprise (e.g., training, beliefs); for any research area draws on variables such as these to generate hypotheses and research programs. Science, after all, is a human activity.

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