

A Contribution to the Study of the Possession Trance Mediumship of Jane Roberts¹

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Abstract. This article presents a new examination of the possession trance mediumship of Jane Roberts, the woman who channeled the purported discarnate entity called Seth between 1963 and 1984. Roberts's mediumship has generally been overlooked by the parapsychological research community. The purpose of the present article is to fill this gap in the literature. This article presents a preliminary description of Jane Roberts's mediumship for parapsychologists who may be unfamiliar with the case, including an account of Roberts's personal life and mediumistic career. The relevance of Roberts's mediumship for parapsychology is examined. A comparison with the Patience Worth case is presented and the paranormal character of the Roberts mediumship is evaluated.

Keywords: Jane Roberts; mediumship; parapsychology; Seth

The mediumship of Jane Roberts has been the topic of doctoral dissertations (e.g., rhetoric of channeled text, Petit, 2007; models of human development, Kilmartin, 2012; pluralistic models of self, time, and consciousness; Skafish, 2011), master's theses (e.g., sleep and telepathy, Dutton, 1983; literary studies, Shaw, 2016), and other scholarly work (e.g., philosophy and physics, Friedman, 1994). Based on his own thorough study of channeling and mediumship, parapsychologist Arthur Hastings (1991) concluded that

Jane's work marks the dividing point between classical mediums, who call up spirits of the dead, and contemporary channeling, with its teachers, sages, and guides. Though there were other discarnate teachers before Seth, none communicated to the public so effectively. His presence created acceptance for the role of the channeled teacher that many others now play. . . . [The Seth Material] is among the best of the channeled transpersonal teachings. (p. 78)

This is not a mere hagiographic testimonial and ungrounded opinion by someone with no actual knowledge of parapsychology, but a fair and reasoned conclusion based on critical analysis of the Seth phenomena by a scholar who had thorough familiarity with the entire body of Seth Material published at that time. Not since the Spiritualism movement of the late 19th century has a phenomenon such as the mediumship of Jane Roberts had such effect on the secularization of modern religion within the broader history of Western esotericism (Hanegraaf, 1997).

Yet Roberts's mediumship has generally been overlooked by the parapsychological research com-

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munity. Overviews of evidence for the survival thesis (i.e., the persistence of personal identity after bodily death) do not mention the Roberts mediumship. This includes a special issue of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* devoted to an examination of mental mediumship (Braude, 2010), a book of essays dedicated to an examination of mediumship from a variety of disciplinary points of view (Rock, 2013), and an authoritative handbook covering the gamut of psi phenomena (Cardeña, Palmer, & Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015). To paraphrase William James in a letter he wrote to Carl Stumpf in 1886, “I don’t know what [parapsychologists] think of such work, but I think that the present condition of opinion regarding it is [curious], there being a mass of testimony, or apparent testimony, about such things, at which the only men capable of a critical judgment—men of scientific education—will not even look” (in Murphy & Ballou, 1961, p. 65).

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap in the literature. First, a preliminary description of Jane Roberts’s mediumship is presented for parapsychologists who may be unfamiliar with the case. Second, the paranormal character of the Roberts mediumship is critically examined. In the words of parapsychologist Ian Stevenson (1971): “My theme is that we need to continue and enlarge the study of spontaneous cases (i.e., all the naturally occurring phenomena studied by parapsychologists) if we are to advance the whole field of parapsychology and not just parts of it” (p. 92).

Preliminaries

Jane Roberts’s Background

Information about Jane Roberts’s personal background comes from biographic commentaries written by people who knew her (e.g., Watkins, 2001), excerpts of Jane’s unpublished autobiography (*From This Rich Life*), footnotes written by Jane’s husband, Robert (“Rob”) Butts, contained in the published Seth books, and from material housed in Yale University’s Sterling Memorial archives documenting Jane’s personal life and literary career (“Jane Roberts Papers;” Roberts, 1915-2017).

Dorothy Jane Roberts was born in Saratoga Springs, New York, on May 8, 1929, the only child of Delmer and Marie (Burdo) Roberts. In 1931, when Jane was two years old, her father and mother divorced. For the next five years, Jane lived on welfare with her mother in half of a rented house shared with her mother’s parents in a relatively poor neighborhood of Sarasota Springs. It was during this time that Jane’s mother began to develop a long-standing rheumatoid arthritis condition that eventually made her bedridden—the same disease of which Jane would die in 1984 at the age of 55. Being raised a Catholic, priests in the parish regularly visited the house to offer help to the family. The sexual overtones of these visits is disclosed in Jane’s recollection about “how the one priest who put her to bed when she was but 3 or 4 years old would ‘play’ with her sexually, and how Marie finally figured that out” (Roberts, 1997, p. 222).

Following the death of her grandmother in an automobile accident in 1937, Jane’s grandfather (Joseph Bardo) moved out of the house. This left 8-year-old Jane alone to care for her invalid mother, along with a succession of unreliable housekeepers and domestic help. In 1940, when her mother’s arthritic condition became so severe that she required prolonged hospitalization, 11-year old Jane was sent to live at a strict Roman Catholic orphanage in Troy, New York. The orphanage had very restrictive

rules (e.g., a prohibition of showering nude) and viewed with suspicion any creative behavior as potentially dangerous (e.g., the nuns confiscated and burned Jane's poetry because it was considered heretical; Watkins, 2001, pp. 13-14).

Two years later when Jane returned home, the 13-year-old teenager was greeted by a mother who had turned from a beautiful, articulate, and compelling personality into an embittered, bedridden invalid who blamed Jane for the break-up of her marriage and her physical condition. The burden of caring for her mother now fell entirely upon Jane's shoulders. "Thus, her early life was one of cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, getting up in the night to put more coal on the stove, bringing her mother the bedpan, and enduring a never-ending stream of appalling psychological abuse" (Watkins, 2001, p. 13). Jane recounted some of this psychological abuse in a 1973 interview published in the *Elmira Star Gazette*:

My mother was a strong, domineering woman, probably scared to death of the position she found herself in. She was psychotic, attempting suicide several times and scaring the devil out of me as a kid with threats . . . One day [she] would say that she loved me, and the next day she'd scream that she was sorry I'd ever been born—that I'd ruined her life . . . She would often stuff her mouth with cotton and hold her breath, pretending that she was dead, to scare me when I was small. Sometimes she'd tell me she really could walk and during the night she was going to get up, turn on the gas jets, and kill us both. I would be absolutely terrified . . . And yet she encouraged my writing and would tell me that I was a good kid and she didn't know why she acted that way but then she'd do it again. (Watkins, 2001, pp. 13-14)

According to Rob, her husband, it was during these early years that Jane "began a pattern of repressing her impulses by refusing to retaliate against her abusive mother" (Watkins, 2001, p. 14). To escape this unhappy childhood, Jane wrote poetry. By the testimony of those who knew her during these early years, Jane always wanted to become a writer and devote her life to writing poetry, novels, and short stories.

In 1946, when she was a senior in high school, 17-year old Jane Roberts won an honorable mention in a poetry contest sponsored by *Scholastic Magazine* and was awarded a scholarship to Skidmore College (Saratoga, NY). As a college student, Jane received mediocre grades, doing well in subjects that she liked (music, poetry, literature) and poorly in subjects she did not (biology, psychology, mathematics). In her junior year, she was expelled from Skidmore for a breach of "social discipline" that involved attending an all-night party at a professor's house "with some senior students. Walter ("Walt") Zeh, long-time friend of Jane Roberts, wrote: "[Jane] was picked from the group for punishment. Her scholarship was withdrawn, and the other girls, all of them members of wealthy families and seniors, got off 'scot-free'" (Watkins, 2001, p. 17).

Now 21 years old, Jane decided that she had enough of school and the morbid atmosphere of home life and in 1950 went cross-country on a motorcycle with long-time Saratoga Springs friend Walt Zeh to visit her father who lived in Santa Monica, California. Several months later, Jane and Walt returned to Sarasota and in 1951 were married. Three years later, they divorced on amicable terms. According to Jane, their three-year marriage "had been entirely platonic—she was a virgin when she met

Rob [Butts]” at a party in 1953 (Watkins, 2001, p. 15). On December 27, 1954, 25-year-old Jane Roberts and 35-year-old Rob Butts were married in Marathon, Florida. Jane wrote: “We were deeply in love. But besides that, we both knew we wanted to devote our whole lives to our work—he to painting and me to writing—no matter where it led or whether we were successful or not” (Watkins, 2001, p. 15). After Jane and Rob were married, life was a struggle. They lived for a while in Tenafly, New Jersey and Rob commuted to New York City to find work in the comic book field as a graphic artist. Rob wrote: “We had no [regular] jobs, very little money, and no luxurious feelings of security” (Watkins, 2001, p. 18).

The Coming of Seth

Things got better when they moved back to Rob’s hometown of Sayre, Pennsylvania. By 1963 at the age of 34, Jane Roberts had already published dozens of science fantasy magazine stories, including “The Red Wagon” in 1956 and two science fiction novels, *The Chestnut Beads* in 1957 and *The Bantu* in 1958. Her third science fiction novel, *The Rebels*, has just been published. Jane was working as an assistant at a local art gallery at the time and her 44-year-old artist husband was working part-time at a local Artistic Greeting card company. Despite their feelings of relative financial security and the opportunity to find time to do what they loved—write and paint—Jane felt unsettled. She recounted:

The year 1963 had been a poor one for us. Rob had severe back trouble, and hardly felt well enough to paint when he came home from work. I was having difficulties settling on another book idea. Our old pet dog, Mischa, had died. Perhaps these circumstances made me more aware than usual of our human vulnerability. Perhaps, all unknowing, I had reached a crisis and my psychic abilities awoke as a result of inner need. (Roberts, 1970, p. 9)

It was these special circumstances that Jane believed provided the trigger that sparked the remarkable event that initiated Jane’s introduction to Seth, the “gestalt energy essence” who was to communicate through her for more than two decades. The late afternoon of September 9, 1963 began ordinarily enough as Jane sat down at the kitchen table to work on her poetry when suddenly, Jane recounted,

between one normal minute and the next, a fantastic avalanche of radical, new ideas burst into my head with tremendous force, as if my skull were some sort of receiving station, turned up to unbearable volume. Not only ideas came pouring through this channel, but sensations, intensified and pulsating. . . It was as if the physical world was really tissue-thin, hiding infinite dimensions of reality, and I was suddenly flung through the tissue paper with a huge ripping sound. My body sat at the table, my hands furiously scribbling down the words that flashed through my head. Yet I seemed to be somewhere else, at the same time, traveling through things. (Roberts, 1970, p. 10)

Upon regaining her usual waking state of awareness, Jane discovered that she had produced 15 to 20 pages of manuscript titled *The Physical Universe as Idea Construction* that formed the foundation of the Seth Material and which would be subsequently elaborated upon over the course of Jane’s 21-year mediumship. Their curiosity aroused by this extraordinary and unexpected “awakening experience” (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017), Jane and Rob resolved to investigate further. They knew little about

parapsychology at the time, had “never been to a medium, never had a telepathic experience in their lives, and never even seen a Ouija board” (Roberts, 1970, p. 14). They decided to conduct a series of do-it-yourself experiments that were “designed to discover whether or not the ordinary person could develop extrasensory abilities” (Roberts, 1970, p. 14). They sent a book proposal to Fredrick Fell Books offering to explore a variety of parapsychological topics, including the Ouija board, séances, precognitive and clairvoyant dreams, telepathy, trance states, predictions, reincarnation memories, and apparitions. Shortly after the book proposal was accepted, they began their experiments (see Roberts, 1966). They decided to start with the Ouija board because they thought it to be the least complicated of the experiments to conduct.

On that fateful evening of December 8, 1963, when Jane and Rob sat down for their fourth session with the Ouija board that they had borrowed from their landlord, they made their first contact with Seth (Seth’s responses are CAPITALIZED).

“Do you have a message for us?” Rob asked.

“CONSCIOUSNESS IS LIKE A FLOWER WITH MANY PETALS,” replied the pointer.

Rob said, “What do you think of your various reincarnations?” [During their prior three sessions with the board, they had received one- or two-word messages ostensibly coming from a Frank Watts, later discovered to have lived in Elmira, New York who died in the 1940s and who had communicated details related to a previous life as a soldier in Turkey]

“THEY ARE WHAT I AM. BUT I WILL BE MORE. PUN: THE WHOLE IS THE SUM OF ITS HEARTS.” This was the first time the pointer spelled complete sentences. I laughed.

“Is all of this Jane’s subconscious talking?” Rob asked.

“SUBCONSCIOUS IS A CORRIDOR. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHICH DOOR YOU TRAVEL THROUGH?”

“Maybe it’s *your* subconscious,” I said to Rob, but he was already asking another question.

“Frank [Watts], can we refer back to you on any specific question in the future?”

“YES. I PREFER NOT TO BE CALLED FRANK [WATTS]. THAT PERSONALITY WAS RATHER COLORLESS.”

Rob and I shrugged at each other: this was really wild, and the pointer was speeding faster and faster. Rob waited a moment, then asked, “What would you prefer to be called?”

“TO GOD, ALL NAMES ARE HIS NAME,” the pointer spelled.

Now [Watts] was getting religious! I rolled my eyes and pretended to stare out the window. “But we still need some kind of name to use in talking to you,” Rob said.

“YOU MAY CALL ME WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE. I CALL MYSELF SETH. IT FITS THE ME OF ME, THE PERSONALITY MORE CLEARLY APPROXIMATING THE WHOLE SELF I AM, OR AM TRYING TO BE.” (Roberts, 1970, pp. 16-17)

By the 8th session, Jane was mentally receiving answers to questions before the board spelled them out. She was soon hearing whole paragraphs of sentences in her head at a faster and faster rate until the rush of words was simply too much to contain. “And without really knowing how or why,” Jane recounted, “I opened up my mouth and let them out. For the first time I began to speak for Seth, continuing the sentences the board had spelled out only a moment before” (Roberts, 1970, p. 19). By the 14th session, a deepening of Jane’s voice and darkening of her eyes were observed during dictation, and at the 26th session on February 28, 1964 the Ouija board was laid aside and Jane spoke for Seth for the first time before an outside witness (an acquaintance, John Bradley; Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, pp. 195-202). Thus began the mediumship that was to continue for 21 years—from December 8, 1963 until August 30, 1984, six days before her death on September 5, 1984 of rheumatoid arthritis at the age of 55, after being bed-ridden at St. Joseph’s Hospital for 21 months.

The Seth Material

Over the 21-year Roberts mediumship, ten books had been dictated by Seth (Roberts, 1972, 1974, 1977-1979, 1979a, 1981a, 1986a, 1995, 1997). Jane’s husband, Robert (Rob) Butts, who died on May 26, 2008 at the age of 89, had transcribed all Seth sessions verbatim as they occurred and supplemented the written record with notes to provide a psychosocial context for each session. Interestingly, Mary Dillman (2016), who has been researching the Jane Roberts papers archived at Yale University since 1998, has found several differences between what appears in published books and Robert Butt’s typed sessions, which may represent significantly different renderings of Seth’s original words by the publisher.

The Seth sessions were witnessed by many individuals including: hypnotist George N. Estabrooks (Oswego State University College), psychologist Eugene Bernard (North Carolina University), psychiatrist John O. Beahrs, parapsychologists Raymond van Over (Parapsychology Foundation) and Andrija Puharich, author Richard Bach (*Johnathan Livingston Seagull*), Tam Mossman (editor, Prentice-Hall), scientist William H. Kautz (Stanford Research Institute), and many others. Audio recordings and transcripts of Seth speaking at Jane Roberts’s ESP classes (New Awareness Network, 2017; Roberts, 2008-2010) and accounts of individuals who attended Jane Roberts’s ESP class from 1972-1979 also form part of the public record (e.g., Kendall, 2011; Watkins, 1980-1981).

A video recording of Seth speaking through Jane Roberts and an interview of Jane and Rob (Butts, 1986) provide additional documentation of the phenomenon. Rob Butts stated in the 68th session of July 6, 1964: “Jane and I have no set opinions concerning the Seth Material. We are engaged in it and with it, and we record what we learn. We do not feel that at this stage any other opinion or attitude is needed. We let the material speak for itself” (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 2, p. 208). All evidential material, including Jane Roberts’s personal journals, notebooks, and correspondence are housed in Yale University’s Sterling Memorial Library archives and provide a good overview of the history of the case (“Jane Roberts Papers;” Roberts, 1915-2017).

A large body of literary work was also produced by Jane Roberts while not in a Seth trance. It includes an account of her do-it-yourself experiments for developing psi (Roberts, 1966), an overview of Seth's theories and concepts (Roberts, 1970), three novels (Roberts, 1973, 1979b, 1984), a children's book (Roberts, 1979c), a personality theory called "Aspect Psychology" (Roberts, 1975a, 1976, 1981b), two books of poetry (Roberts, 1975b, 1982), three "World Views" books presenting the "postmortem experience and opinions" of Paul Cézanne (Roberts, 1977), William James (Roberts, 1978), and Rembrandt van Rijn (Roberts, 2006), and an account of her experiences in dreams and projections of consciousness (Roberts, 1986b).

Jane's growth as a medium helped her discover "many other levels of awareness, each distinct and bringing its own kind of perception and experience" (Roberts, 1975a, p. v). One of these developments was the reception of psychical material from what she termed "The Library"—a psychic image transposed over a corner of her living room where she saw her own image writing (Roberts, 1976). In addition to the Seth-Jane possession trance, there was the less frequent and phenomenologically different Seth II possession trance (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, pp. 265-277, 292). Seth II (a gestalt identity whom Roberts referred to as Seth's "entity") claimed never to have had existence in physical reality and to be the actual source of the Seth Material. Seth II placed Seth in the same relationship to himself as Seth stood in relation to Jane Roberts. According to Seth II, "Seth, as you know him, is a medium through whom we speak, as Ruburt is a medium through whom Seth, as you know him, speaks" (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 9, p. 242). Outside of a Seth trance, Jane sometimes spontaneously broke out into singing an artificial language that she called "Sumari." The syntactic and semantic character of Roberts's Sumari language appears to have no clear connection with any known language. More expert linguistic analysis might reveal it to be a form of glossolalia (Malony & Lovekin, 1985).

The fact that the Seth Material consists of spoken and not written communiqués is important. Part of the evidence for the proposition that Patience Worth was a different personality from Pearl Curran, for example, lies in Patience's humorous and often acerbic conversations with onlookers, presenting the picture of a robust individual with her own distinctive memories, interests, attitudes, and characteristics (Prince, 1929). Seth wanted all his personal comments included in the published material so that his unique personality characteristics would be conveyed. Seth stated, "*for this is part of the message. It is not to be simply the presentation of ideas . . . It is also to be the fact that a highly alive individual, such as myself, gives the material . . . [Jane] should not present my ideas as if they come from thin air, for this is to rob the material . . . for I am the proof of my own pudding, you see*" [emphasis in the original] (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, pp. 316-317).

Seth declared early in the Roberts mediumship that Jane would be the only person through whom he would communicate.

I will never speak through anyone other than Ruburt [Seth's name for Jane's entity or whole Self], simply because there must never be any doubt of the origin of the Seth Material . . . I am a teacher and I have this work. It must come only from one source. . . . I have worked very hard to help Ruburt condition himself to provide for the material's integrity and cut down on distortions. I would be appalled at going through that all *that* over again. . . . I would not

double or triple the chances for distortions by attempting to speak through someone else. . . . My communications will come exclusively through Ruburt at all times. (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 9, pp. 187-188, 241, 443)

Another reason for this exclusivity is that Seth, Jane, and Rob form a threesome that together provided the necessary synergy for the communications to occur (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, pp. 204-205). Speaking to Rob, Seth said, "Your own relationships, yours and Ruburt and the relationship between us in the past [life], do much to make our communication possible. You act as a transmitter, whether you are at a session or not. So unless there is an *identical* Ruburt and Joseph [the name of Rob Butts's entity] combination, I am stuck with you" (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 9, pp. 240-241). Based on these statements from Seth, it would be reasonable to question the legitimacy of any alleged Seth Material channeled through any medium other than Jane Roberts.

Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists may find some value in the seven posthumously published volumes of *Personal Sessions* containing "deleted" Seth Material dealing with Roberts's personal life that was regarded as too sensitive for public disclosure prior to her death (Roberts, 2003- 2006). A close reading of the *Personal Sessions* reveals that the Seth personality had an ability to improvise on themes intimately related to Jane's and Rob's personal life with penetrating psychological insight that pinpointed their character, abilities, and liabilities.

Of special interest to parapsychologists are the nine posthumously published volumes of *Early Sessions* comprising the first 510 Seth sessions from November 26, 1963 through January 19, 1970, which provide a detailed record of the emergence and development of Roberts's mediumship prior to the publication of Seth's first book in 1972 (Roberts, 1997-2002). These two sets of collected works present key philosophical and psychological concepts that inform the theoretical background and practical application of the Seth Material. "The basic and firm groundwork of the material, and its primary contribution," Seth stated, "lies in the concept that consciousness itself indeed creates matter, that consciousness is not imprisoned by matter but forms it, and that consciousness is not limited or bound by time or space" (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 2, p. 312).

A Mediumship Difficult to Classify

The Roberts mediumship is difficult to classify under parapsychology's current taxonomies because it displays a mixture of characteristics that overlap typical categories of mediumistic activity. It can be classified as an instance of "channeling" because it involves "*the communication of information to or through a physically embodied human being from a source that is said to exist on some other level or dimension of reality than the physical as we know it*" [italics in the original] (Klimo, 1987, p. 2). It can be classified as a "trance" mediumship because, at times, it displayed a sleep-like altered state of consciousness "with limited (or absent) sensory and motor awareness [and] subsequent amnesia" (Gowan, 1975, p. 35). It can also be classified as a "mental" mediumship because, at other times, it exhibited characteristics of "a conscious and focused waking state" (Buhrman, 1997, p. 13). Jane's usual behavioral habits, for example, were not totally submerged during a Seth trance. She could get up and move about, smoke a cigarette, and sip wine, beer, or coffee. It can be classified as a "possession" because it is "an experience involving a radical alteration of *embodied* identity [consisting of] a clear, differentiated identity,

whether human or otherwise, that takes over the usual identity of the individual” (Cardeña, 1989, pp. 2, 13). It is an *intentional* possession, however, because there was no coercion, the Seth-Jane personality depended on Jane’s willingness to dissociate, and Jane could terminate the Seth trance whenever she chose. There was not a “switch” of personalities but the co-conscious and simultaneous existence of two identities within the same body (Beahrs, 1982). In certain respects, the concepts of “possession,” “mental mediumship,” “trance mediumship,” and “channel” limit understanding of Seth-Jane’s reality and Jane’s mediumship experience, especially when experiences, not abstract categories, determine the nature of the phenomenon.

The mediumship of Jane Roberts is also difficult to classify because of the evolving character of its phenomenology over its 21-year history. The degree of sensory and motor awareness, amnesia, dissociation (“the coexistence of separate mental systems that should be integrated in the person’s consciousness, memory, or identity”) and depersonalization (“the self experiences itself as detached or at an unbridgeable distance from ongoing perceptions, actions, emotions, or thoughts”) varied over time (Cardeña, 1994, pp. 19, 24). In the early sessions, Jane reported that she was rarely so “blacked out” as to feel as if she was sleeping and usually knew what was happening, although she almost instantaneously forgot what she said as Seth-Jane. At “other times, though less seldom, I am in the foreground and Seth advises me what to say” (Roberts, 1970, p. 77). Later in her mediumship, Jane experienced her Seth-Jane possession trance as “an accelerated state characterized by a feeling of inexhaustible energy, emotional wholeness, and subjective freedom” in which she remained aware of two streams of consciousness—Seth’s and her own (Roberts, 1979a, p. 16).

Relevance for Parapsychology

For purposes of this discussion, because the Seth Material is a production of Jane Roberts (the medium) and Seth (the ostensible discarnate) and since both are distinctively bound up in its creation, the term “Seth-Jane” (Jane’s possession trance personality) is used to refer to the hybrid “bridge” personality structure used by the purported Seth entity to communicate through Jane Roberts.

A View from Within the Psyche

Seth-Jane’s mediumistic communications may be of interest to parapsychologists because they articulate a set of original hypotheses about the mechanisms that underlie mediumship from the “inside” viewpoint of the survival personality for whom the medium speaks that is different, relatively speaking, from the phenomenological viewpoint of the observing medium (Beischel, 2007, 2013; White, 1960). Seth-Jane’s first book, *Seth Speaks* (Roberts, 1972), ostensibly provides a detailed look of what it is like for any survival personality to speak through a medium. It offers an examination of the physical system of existence as it appears to the survival personality, a description of the nature and conditions of the after-death environment, and a discussion of the manipulations that are necessary from “the other side” for mediumistic communications to occur. This book also contains information about the mechanics of experience underlying mediumship that may advance understanding on a number of issues, including how a medium is led to make those correct statements that provide ostensible evidential material concerning the previous lives of survival personalities and some of the reasons for the various, often

contradictory, statements received by mediums in which quite different pictures of afterlife reality are portrayed.

Seth-Jane's description of the function and composition of the "psychological bridge" that must be present for Seth's communications to take place may be of interest to parapsychologists studying mediumship (Roberts, 1997-2000, Vol. 6, pp. 14-16). The bridge personality is an intervening psychological structure that differs in important respects from traditional "control personalities" (i.e., an entity that acts as an intermediary between the survival personality and the medium). It is basically a psychological protrusion or expansion formed partly by portions of Seth's ostensible larger identity and partly by portions of Jane's own personality to create a tertiary "gestalt personality" that is a connector. "Some information comes to Ruburt [*Jane*] fairly automatically," Seth-Jane explained, "in that he speaks for me without having to consciously translate for me. At the same time, because of the methods we use, some translation is often necessary. In many cases, this translation is done by the intervening psychological framework. It is composed of energy. It is not a secondary personality, for it exists in quite different dimensions than secondary personalities" (p. 14).

The bridge personality is a purely psychical organization that telepathically transmits, and to some extent translates, but does not interpret the impressions and concepts that are sent from Seth at his end to Jane at her end. Once created, this composite psychological framework is somewhat independent of both Seth and Jane in that it is capable of growth and development. Jane stated: "I am not saying that Seth is *just* a psychological structure allowing me to tune into revelational knowledge, nor denying that he has an independent existence. I do think that some kind of blending must take place in sessions between his personality and mine, and that this 'psychological bridge' *itself* is a legitimate structure that must take place in any such communication. Seth is at his end, I am at mine" [italics in the original] (Roberts, 1970, p. 272). Seth-Jane stated: "My communications come through Ruburt's [*Jane's*] subconscious. . . . Ruburt assembles me or allows me to assemble myself in a way that is recognizable to you, but regardless of this, I exist in an independent manner" (Roberts, 1970, p. 54).

Theory of Intrapersonal Telepathy

Parapsychologists may also find of interest Seth-Jane's distinction between two forms of telepathy: (a) an elemental, rudimentary form of "intrapersonal" psi by which mind-to-brain communication is hypothesized to occur within the individual, and (b) the "interpersonal" telepathy between two individuals that is typically studied by parapsychologists in laboratory settings. Only intrapersonal telepathy will be discussed here. Intrapersonal telepathy is hypothesized to be a rudimentary form of mind-body communication whereby intention, desire, and expectation are conveyed from a basically nonphysical Self to essentially intangible representations of itself (i.e., telepathic structures) that are subsequently materialized into the tangible biological structures of the physical body (e.g., neurons). These telepathic structures provide the initial invisible pathways around which biological structures form themselves during the process of neurogenesis and an inner-ordered framework that permits the brain to handle basically nonverbal information that is beyond its capacity to translate into neurological terms. Once the telepathic tracks are laid down, so to speak, the unformed neurological structures have a path to follow on which to materially build and that informs their subsequent functioning.

Seth-Jane's hypothesized telepathic structures could be construed to be a nonphysical psi-factor that underlies the physical electromagnetic (EM) field forces discovered by Burr and Northrop (1935) that organize, direct, and maintain biological organisms in their same relative form throughout the continual turnover and replacement of the physical matter that composes them. An extra ingredient in Burr and Northrop's explanation is needed to account for the ability of EM fields to establish, direct, and maintain the body's organization in the first place. Seth-Jane proposes that elemental telepathy with its accompanying telepathic structures is that extra ingredient. Using Russell's (1971) terminology, telepathic structures (T-fields) would supplement the electromagnetic fields (L-fields) in the body's communication system. It is within these elemental telepathic structures of the cell rather than in its physical material that the condensed electrically-coded data of experience are retained. The idea that the body has an intangible but actual framework composed of electrically-coded psychical energy (e.g., electric bodymind;" Becker & Selden, 1985) about whose reference points the physical body is constituted may sound quite esoteric, but is a highly practical concept basic to almost all Eastern physiology associated with Yoga and acupuncture (Evans, 1986).

These putative telepathic structures would hypothetically function as an intervening psi factor that mediates human transformative capacities observed in instances of mind-body communications (e.g., placebo response, biofeedback, hypnosis, "miraculous" cures at Lourdes, charisms such as stigmata, imagery and healing, yogic siddhis; Murphy, 1992). These mind-body interactions would be associated with changes in voltage gradients of the body's organized electromagnetic (EM) fields that can be measured using sensitive micro and millivoltmeters (Ravitz, 2002, Chaps. 6-10). From the point of view of Seth-Jane, "Do not think of the mind as a purely mental entity, and of the body as a purely physical one. Instead, think of both mind and body as continuing, interweaving processes that are mental and physical at once. Your thoughts actually are quite as physical as your body is, and your body is quite as nonphysical as it seems to you your thoughts are. You are actually a vital force, existing as a part of your environment, and yet apart from your environment at the same time" (Roberts, 1997, p. 131).

Comparison with the Case of Patience Worth

A systematic study of the published record of the Roberts's mediumship suggests a number of comparisons with the 1913-1937 case of Patience Worth (Braude, 2003, Chapter 5; Prince, 1927, pp. 15-21, 392-403). In terms of similarities, both communicators initially emerged via a Ouija board and displayed remarkable literary and mnemonic virtuosity. Both mediumships exhibited striking personality differences between the medium and the channeled entity, both displayed expertise in subject matter not easily unaccounted for on the basis of biography, and both involved a single medium. Moreover, both mediumships offered little to no concrete evidence for the prior corporeal existence of the entities they channeled.

In terms of differences, unlike the Roberts's mediumship, no physical phenomena were reported in Curran's mediumship. Patience as Pearl could simultaneously carry out more than one task on demand (e.g., dictate a poem and write a letter to a friend in a manner that resembled automatic writing), whereas Seth as Jane never demonstrated such multi-task performances. The language of Patience-Pearl consisted largely of archaic and obscure old English dialects presumably unknown to Pearl

Curran, whereas the language of Seth-Jane consisted of 20th century English vocabulary familiar to Jane Roberts. Patience Worth produced novels, poems, and short stories generated while Pearl was in a state of normal waking consciousness, whereas Seth dictated philosophical and psychological treatises while Jane was in an alternate state of possession trance.

Evaluation

The challenge for psychology is to explain how Jane Roberts of Elmira, NY, could suddenly possess, in full-blown fashion with no apparent previous study or instruction and no gradual development, an ability to compose internally coherent philosophical, psychological, spiritual, and ethical material of a very high order of originality, conceptual sophistication, and intellectual rigor in long complex narratives, laying the material aside sometimes for weeks or months and then resuming without difficulty or review, with no period of fumbling and no declension in average quality, but with the same facility and power from start to finish, while in a possession trance (i.e., a “temporary alteration of consciousness, identity, and/or behavior” with “replacement by an alternate identity” attributed to a spiritual force or another person; Cardeña, Van Duijl, Weiner, & Terhune, 2009, p. 173). A review of Jane Roberts’s background indicates that the causative factors of past experience and environment that psychologists are accustomed to look for to explain how she acquired such abilities and knowledge are not to be found. Some scholars might argue that such abilities may be paranormal (Kelly et al., 2007).

Evidence of ESP and PK

The value of the mediumship of Jane Roberts for modern parapsychology ultimately lies in the extent to which there is evidence that Jane had genuine psychic ability or that Seth is in fact a survival personality. The nine volumes of the *Early Sessions* (Roberts, 1997-2002) provide reports of experiments that directly bear on the question of psi-functioning in the Roberts mediumship. This includes the series of 84 informal, free-response telepathy/clairvoyance “envelope tests” that began August 18, 1965 and ended February 13, 1967 (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vols. 4-7). It also includes the more formal series of 76 clairvoyance tests that were conducted from September 20, 1965 to June 29, 1966 two nights a week with “Dr. Instream” (pseudonym for Dr. George N. Estabrook, professor of psychology at Oswego State University) (Roberts, 1970, pp. 33-38, 55-110). Jane wrote to Dr. Instream on July 10, 1966 canceling the series of experiments because she had received no correspondence from him since January of that year and no feedback regarding the outcomes of any of the tests (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, pp. 331-332).

The results of the informal “envelope tests” were not always consistent and cannot be considered scientific evidence for psi functioning because the scoring rate was not at a level to rule out counter-explanations and odds against chance could not be calculated (Beloff, 1980, p. 92). Despite these drawbacks, however, the relevance of these experiments for parapsychologists is found in the detailed commentaries that Seth-Jane provided about (a) the associative processes involved in anomalous information reception, (b) the indiscriminate fashion in which impressions may be received, (c) bleed-throughs that can occur between series of tests, and (d) the influence of emotional charges of the target data on information reception (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 7, pp. 43-46).

Spontaneous physical phenomena were infrequently produced during the Roberts mediumship. Seth-Jane always regarded such demonstrations of his reality as “childish endeavors” and “amusing diversions” from his real purpose of education (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, p. 150). The physical phenomena that were reported – ectoplasms (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, pp. 52-57), apparitions (Vol. 2, pp. 208-223) and table-tipping (Vol. 8, pp. 139-151) – were witnessed by others and recorded immediately after they occurred. One may reasonably conclude the events to have happened as reported (i.e., are authentic; Stevenson, 1971, p. 93n). However, the reported phenomena would not be considered as scientifically valid evidence of psi by parapsychologists because they do not fulfill psi research evidential criteria; that is, they did not permit control over other variables to rule out alternative explanations such as suggestion, faulty observation (Braude, 1997, pp. 23-50, 53-63).

Roberts' Mediumship as a Case of Survival

Nor does the possession trance mediumship of Jane Roberts satisfy most of the “desirable features” of an ideal survival case (Braude, 2003, pp. 284-285). Seth-Jane stated: “I have been conscious before your earth was formed” (Roberts, 1972, p. 6) and “In your dreams you have been where I am” (Roberts, 1970, p. 2). Such claims are difficult, if not impossible, to empirically verify. Moreover, Seth-Jane described himself as a “personality identity essence” who had reincarnated many times. However, few details about those previous earthly lives are presented. The only apparent evidence that Seth ever existed as an actual person was the momentary appearance via the Ouija board in December 8, 1963 of his alleged previous incarnation as “Frank Watts” whose name was later tracked down to someone known to have lived in Elmira, New York and died in the 1940s. Few other checkable details about Frank Watts's earthly life were offered (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, pp. 1-23, 101-102, 224-225, 262-263; Vol. 2, 336-337). Other than the literary fact that “Seth” was the name given to the third son of Adam (Genesis 4:25) and to a god in Egyptian religion and mythology, no one has documented the actual existence of an individual corresponding to the Seth entity—living or dead. The Seth-Jane personality thus arguably represents “a case of survival only in form, not in substance” (Braude, 2003, pp. 171).

Conventional mediumistic activity (i.e., communication with survival personalities) is reported to have occurred outside of Seth sessions. Jane's first planned séance happened in 1968 when she contacted two discarnates identified as “Blanche Price” and “Billie Kramerick” (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, pp. 165-173). Spontaneous séances also occurred in which contact was made with a “Malba Bronson” who allegedly died in South Dakota in 1946 at the age of 46 (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, pp. 103-105, 127-130), a nameless “spokesperson” for a group of discarnates (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 2, pp. 167-168, 173), a “Father Trainor,” a priest friend of Jane's when she was growing up in the Catholic orphanage as a child (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 3, pp. 261-262), and a “Sarah Wellington” who died in England in 1748 at the age of 17 (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 8, pp. 64-68). Except for Blanche Price, Billie Kramerick, and Fr. Trainor, little evidential information about the earthly life of these individuals is provided. Few supportive details are presented that can be empirically verified through existing historical documents to prove that any of the other purported survival personalities correspond to a real person.

Paranormal Character of the Roberts Mediumship

Given the corroborating testimony of many witnesses, the high reliability of concurrent reporting methods, and the large number of Seth sessions conducted over the 21-year history of the phenomenon, the mediumship of Jane Roberts can be deemed to have authenticity (i.e., it actually happened as reported). The published record, however, does *not* directly indicate that anything concerning a *paranormal* interpretation of the Seth sessions is justified at this time. This conclusion is in agreement with what the Seth-Jane trance personality and Jane Roberts herself have repeatedly asserted.

Jane Roberts did not view her mediumship as “paranormal.” In this respect, she resembles the trance medium Eileen J. Garrett who wrote in her autobiography that “my investigations of the phenomena of mediumship convince me that these are not new or extraneous sensitivities but rather refinements of the physical senses all men possess. I cannot therefore accept the usual explanation of mediumship as an abnormal or supernormal development” (Garrett, 1968, p. 9). Jane believed that psi functioning was considered “anomalous” and “paranormal” only because of the artificial divisions applied within the field of psychology itself and the standardization of what mainstream psychology considered “normal” that was reflective of the cultural turf war between psychology and religion (Coon, 1992).

Jane Roberts’s view of Seth was informed by an ongoing desire to understand the meaning of her experience and she strongly questioned both conventional psychological and religious interpretations of her mediumship. Jane was very skeptical of Seth at first and very critical of any references to God, spirit, reincarnation, or religion in his communications because of the conventional connotations that such terms implied. After Jane judged that Seth’s communications might indeed be legitimate communications from other dimensions of actuality telling the species about its own nature, her disdain grew for conventional psychological and religious-spiritualistic explanations of her mediumship (Roberts, 1981b). Jane stated: “This meant personally that I was regarded as having the truth and a spirit guide by spiritualists, or being a fraud or psychologically disturbed at the other end, and in that frame of reference there is no in-between. . . . Either I was looked up to not as myself, but because of Seth, or I was thought of as a nut and disturbed. And I refused the entire framework” (Watkins, 2001, p. 195). Jane saw the Seth phenomenon being too large to be categorized in such a fashion and that conventional explanations were inadequate to fully capture the far more complex and subtle truth of what was going on. “Even if and when our scientists prove telepathy and clairvoyance,” Jane said, “this will certainly help our ideas of personality and reality; but the nature of our existence and reality and the scope of that reality cannot be proven in those terms. You cannot put them down as fact in that particular context” (Watkins, 2001, p. 195).

Jane did not like the term “psychic” applied to her. “The whole psychic bit as it is,” Jane stated, “is intellectually and psychologically outrageous as far as I’m concerned and I want no part of it or the vocabulary or the ideas” (Watkins, 2001, pp. 204-205). Roberts particularly disliked the term “medium” or “channel” being applied to her because of its misleading spiritualistic connotations and the implication that mediumship is somehow the passive reception of neutral information uncolored by the person who receives it, holds it in memory, and passes it on to others. Seth always insisted that his communiqués were sifted through the unique personality characteristics of its source (i.e., Seth) and then again filtered through the subconscious of the medium (i.e., Jane Roberts). This is what gave the communications their

uniqueness and rich dimensions. Recognizing the interaction between the medium's personality and the content of discarnate communications puts the survival thesis in a different light. It explains why descriptions of the afterlife and past life recollections are so varied, may contradict one another, or appear inconsistent with historical fact. Nothing about the psychological nature of any perception—sensory or nonsensory (psi)—is neutral in those terms.

She refused to see her mediumship as some pathological form of dissociation and Seth as a split-off, subconscious fragment of her own personality or as some sort of devil or, more benignly, a pseudo-spiritualistic ghostly spirit-guide of the dead. Jane stated: "We must stop automatically taking such information at face value, translating it through ancient beliefs. We must look at our own experience again—and learn to trust it. . . . We must refuse to let old theories define our realities for us, limiting and distorting the very scope of our lives" (Roberts, 1981b, p. 256). Jane said, "I consider the Seth material as evidence of other aspects of the multidimensional personality. I expect it to lead me to still further insights. To label Seth as a spirit guide is to limit an understanding of what he is" (Watkins, 2001, p. 204).

Nor did Seth approve of the terms "ghost" or "spirit" applied to him. His highly theoretical material about the nature of reality and human personality studiously avoided the use of spiritualistic terminology common in some mediumistic literature (e.g., Anonymous, 1996). Seth-Jane stated:

I do not want this material to be considered any sort of mumbo jumbo . . . in the terms that people often consider material that seems to come from a source beyond the individual who gives it. The designations spirit, medium, and so forth, are ridiculous to begin with. You are simply using inner senses. These senses are not magical, they certainly are not religious in any sense of the word, and I am not some degenerated secondary personality of Ruburt's [Jane]. (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 1, p. 143)

Seth always considered himself an educator primarily.

You are presently focused entirely within physical reality, wondering perhaps what else if anything there may be outside. I am outside, returning momentarily to a dimension that I know and love (Roberts, 1972, pp. 10-11). . . . My mission is to remind you of the incredible power within your own being and to encourage you to recognize and use it (Roberts, 1974, p. 152). . . . These sessions represent your closest and most dependable source of inner knowledge outside of direct personal mystical experience. I am in many ways a most dependable contact with that which is beyond your physical knowledge (Roberts, 1997-2002, Vol. 9, pp. 271-272). . . . I speak myself for those portions of *your* being that already understand. My voice rises from the strata of the psyche in which you also have your existence. Listen, therefore, to your own knowing. (Roberts, 1977-1979, Vol. 2, pp. 22-23)

In Jane's view, her experience was neither unnatural nor supernatural, neither anomalous nor abnormal, but an extension of normal creativity, a prolonged *exceptional human experience* (White, 1993, 1997), representing its own kind of evidence about the "farther reaches of human nature" (Maslow, 1971). The Seth-Jane trance personality stated, "Jane Roberts's experience to some extent hints at the

multidimensional nature of the human psyche and gives clues as to the abilities that lie within each individual. These are part of your racial heritage. They give notice of psychic bridges connecting the known and 'unknown' realities in which you dwell" (Roberts, 1977-1979, Vol. 1, p. 24). Jane Roberts (1970) stated, "Above all, I am sure that Seth is my channel to revelational knowledge, and by this I mean knowledge that is revealed to the intuitive portions of the self rather than discovered by the reasoning faculties. Such revelational information is available to each of us, I believe, to some degree. From it springs the aspirations and achievements of our race" (Roberts, 1970, p. 268).

Conclusion

A thorough familiarity with the Seth Material and systematic study of the history of the Roberts mediumship has produced a conviction in this author that one is in the presence of a legitimate and genuinely original phenomenon that is difficult to classify, and that raises important questions about the nature of personal identity, agency, and human consciousness. Even if we are not justified in interpreting the Roberts possession trance mediumship as having veridical paranormal features by parapsychology's current standards of proof, parapsychologists should not dispense from further study of this case in order to shed light on the problem of Seth's origin and obtain a fuller picture of what unconventional paranormal processes may or may not, in fact, be involved (Stevenson, 1971). The challenge for parapsychology is to determine who Seth was, what his relationship to Jane Roberts was, and where the Seth Material came from. The source-of-psi problem in this context takes the form of how to establish proof of identity of an allegedly discarnate source when the medium is deceased and no longer available for study under controlled conditions in a laboratory or field setting (Cunningham, 2012).

Felser's (2001) invitation to parapsychologists to move beyond a narrow construal of mediumship and a fixed list of evidential criteria and take a philosophical approach to questions about the nature and identity of Seth is a reasonable request. The psychological richness and philosophical sophistication of communicated content and the continued influence of the ideas contained in the Seth Material on the development of modern secular spirituality justifies such a study. The recommendation of Irwin Child (1985), following his appraisal of reviews by critics of Ullman, Krippner, and Vaughan's dream-telepathy experiments, is endorsed here: "Interested readers might well consult the original sources and form their own judgments" (p. 1229). It is through following the facts presented in the published record and remaining open to all avenues of fruitful speculation and intuitive possibilities that a solution to the problem of Seth's origin and the source of the Seth Material will most likely be achieved. F. S. C. Schiller (1918) correctly observed, "Nothing is more likely to impede investigation than premature acceptance of 'explanations'" (p. 402). The only certainty is that the mediumship of Jane Roberts is enormously complex. As parapsychologist Stephen Braude (2003) stated at the end of his study of the case of Patience Worth: "The case is a humbling reminder that there's much still to learn about the human mind" (p. 174). So it is with the possession trance mediumship of Jane Roberts.

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Une Contribution à l'étude de la Transe de Possession de la Médium Jane Roberts

Résumé. Cet article présente un nouvel examen de la médiumnité de transe par possession de Jane Roberts, la femme qui a channelé la supposée entité désincarnée baptisée Seth entre 1963 et 1984. La médiumnité de Roberts a généralement été négligée par la communauté de recherche parapsychologique. Le but du présent article est de colmater cette brèche de la littérature. L'article présente une description préliminaire de la médiumnité de Jane Roberts pour les parapsychologues qui pourraient ne pas être familiers avec le cas, incluant une description de la vie personnelle de Roberts et de sa carrière médiumnique. La pertinence de la médiumnité de Roberts pour la parapsychologie est examinée. Une comparaison avec le cas de Patience Worth est présentée et le caractère paranormal de la médiumnité de Roberts est évalué.

Ein Beitrag zur Untersuchung der Besessenheits-Trancemedialität von Jane Roberts

Zusammenfassung. Dieser Artikel stellt eine neue Untersuchung über die Besessenheits-Trancemedialität von Jane Roberts vor, jener Frau, die zwischen 1963 und 1984 die angeblich verstorbene Wesenheit Seth gechannelt hat. Roberts' Medialität wurde von der parapsychologischen Forschergemeinde bisher

kaum beachtet. Der Zweck des vorliegenden Artikels ist es, diese Lücke in der Literatur zu schließen. Dieser Artikel enthält eine vorläufige Beschreibung von Jane Roberts' Medialität für Parapsychologen, die mit dem Fall vielleicht nicht vertraut sind, einschließlich einer Darstellung von Roberts' Biographie und ihrer Karriere als Medium. Die Bedeutung von Roberts' Medialität für die Parapsychologie wird untersucht. Der Fall Patience Worth wird zum Vergleich herangezogen und eine Einschätzung des paranormalen Charakters von Roberts' Medialität versucht.

Una Contribución al Estudio de la Mediumnidad de Trance de Posesión de Jane Roberts

Resumen. Este artículo presenta un nuevo examen de la mediumnidad de trance de posesión de Jane Roberts, la mujer que canalizó la supuesta entidad desencarnada llamada Seth entre 1963 y 1984. La comunidad de investigación parapsicológica ha pasado por alto la mediumnidad de Roberts. El propósito de este artículo es llenar este vacío en la literatura. El artículo presenta una descripción preliminar de la mediumnidad de Jane Roberts para parapsicólogos que pueden no estar familiarizados con el caso, incluida una descripción de la vida personal y la carrera mediumnística de Roberts. Se examina la relevancia de la mediumnidad de Roberts para la parapsicología, se compara con el caso de Patience Worth y se evalúa el carácter paranormal de la mediumnidad de Roberts.