

LETTERS

OSCAR WILDE IS SAID TO HAVE OBSERVED that we and the Americans have everything in common except the language, and after reading David Fontana's lengthy rejoinder (Issue 8) to my letter (Issue 7) I sense that David and I also are at odds concerning the appropriate use of the English language. But to settle this issue we do not have to examine and re-examine oddities from the unhappy history of psychic research which by definition cannot now be settled categorically; eg., did Harry Price really chuck the famous Borley brick? Did Marthe Béraud's phantom Ben Boa really behave like the Demon King in pantomime, shooting up through a concealed trapdoor? Was G.A. Smith just an accomplished fraudster who took the naïve Myers for a buggy ride? And, please, what new can possibly be said about Palladino in Naples?

In this particular instance we don't have to debate such intangibles, as it is necessary only to read David's original article (*President's Page*, in Issue 5) and compare it with my comments.

David quotes Myers quoting Darwin ("what Darwinism may have done to Darwin"), suggesting that it may seriously have impaired his appreciation of Shakespeare et alia. This might be regarded as Myers' own special pleading (if not a clear case of projection) as it's just as likely that Darwin's anomie resulted from an endogenous depression. David, however, chooses to accept Myers' analysis and adds "there may be something of a warning here." If this isn't a warning against accepting mechanistic biology then it's difficult to see what he does mean.

As far as meta-analysis is concerned I would ask interested readers to look at David's initial observations and then return to my own. I have never carried out a meta-analysis and can only repeat that it is only too easy to reject negative results on the grounds that the experimental designs had been "less promising"; but if we wish to avoid unkind criticism the decision to reject such "less promising" studies should be made *before* and not *after* the meta-analysis. *Post hoc* condemnation really isn't good enough. I thought I had made this fairly plain.

The use of classical prefixes doesn't make terms either scientific or respectable. 'Psi' has rapidly become acceptable as a substitute for 'psychic force' but as we know virtually nothing of either (or even whether they exist) the use of

terms such as 'Psi Hypothesis' is to be deplored. What, please, is this 'Psi Hypothesis'? If it means only that on rare occasions reliable observers have reported phenomena which seem to be inexplicable, then well and good. If we use it to imply anything more than this, that some type of spiritist intervention is involved, then I feel strongly that we are stepping outside the very limited boundaries of what we actually know about the world the universe and everything.

*John Comley*

I HAD A GOOD LAUGH reading U. Nohoogh's account of being a flute denialist. Indeed it reminded me of a certain psychical researcher, whose name I have temporarily forgotten. The only difference, though, is that the flute denier concluded that because *she* couldn't play the flute, no one else ever had or could. In contrast, this psychical researcher only claimed that she had never seen any psychic phenomena, could not know for sure whether they existed or not, and had decided that it was time to stop looking. Her only conclusion was (and I believe she ended one of her books this way) "I don't know".

*X. Psiresearcher*

U. NOHOOGH CLAIMS a tack of success in her attempts to play the flute, but she does not describe precisely what type of flute she was playing. It is quite possible that had she devoted herself to, for instance, the Papuan nose flute, she would not have had the problem of blowing over the hole, but directly into it! (This has the added advantage of clearing the sinuses, etc.) Concerning her statement about concert-goers being deluded by what they see and hear I can assure her that there are no James Galway clones playing recorders in adjacent rooms or hidden tape recorders. I am further surprised that she did not make the discovery that if one takes the "f" off "flute" one gets "lute", which is altogether a more believable instrument.

A lute is a sensuously shaped instrument that one clasps between one's legs and the sound is easily produced by caressing its many varied strings. Its history stretches far back into antiquity

and its music and power has been well-attested. Arabian "ud" ("wood" from which cometh the word "lute") music was used for healing purposes in medieval hospitals and Richard the Lionheart's minstrel (Blondel) discovered his place of imprisonment by communicating with a lute song. Some of the finest Elizabethan music was composed by the great lutenist John Dowland and should U. Nohoogh wish for a performance I can certainly oblige since I own one such instrument.

The Vikings were well known for their luting (*sic*) and pillaging, and undisputed characters from our great tradition of folk "heroes" desired the instruments to such an extent that they would turn to crime to acquire them. In the immortal words of Dick Turpin: "Hand over the lute (no he didn't mean "loot") or I'll bash thee"!

Thus in conclusion I am saddened that U. Nohoogh has decided to give up her flute research. I am hopeful that the world of "paramusicology" will provide evidence in the next few years that will confirm that lute research is a very worthwhile venture.

*Melvyn J. Willin*

IF THIS WAS A LEARNED PAPER, which it is not, I would title it "Susan Blackmore—Enigma"

Here we have Susan, who has spent many years in serious psychical research, held in high regard, declaring with almost childish glee in the January 1999 Issue of *The Paranormal Review* that the Channel 4 programme *The Secrets of the Psychics* is a treat that some readers may have missed. "All is well with the programme" Susan declares, because she explained to the "hearing" that the evidence was "not good enough" (whatever that may mean).

According to the producer, everything that took place in that programme was honest, factual and legitimate. To quote Susan, "Meanwhile, it's good to know that programmers can make challenging and sceptical programmes in the knowledge that, if they do so fairly and honestly, the broadcasting complaints procedure will stand by them. And if *Secrets of the Psychics* comes on again — do watch".

Many years ago I read a fascinating short story. The author had changed all the meanings of descriptive words, and yet managed to produce a coherent tale. Have Susan, and all her friends at Channel 4, had access to that story and placed it at the top of their compulsory reading list?

It's either that or Susan has decided to rewrite the English language. If she has, I look forward to a reinterpretation of all those meaningful words that make up the rich heritage of our mother tongue. We all need a bit of variety in our lives, and from now on life should prove to be very exciting. We will know in future that when we meet the 'Truth Fairy', she will be telling 'Porky Pies'. We will all know that 'Fair' really means 'Fair Cop', and anyone who claims to be honest is in certain danger of being detained at 'Her Majesty's Pleasure'.

As Susan has now become, along with her many other talents, a columnist, it appears that she is now infected with that literary bug which makes so many journalists believe that they are the only arbiters of the truth. It is possible it may be believed that she has seen the light and now knows the true explanation for Ouija board activity. She doesn't actually say so, but I am given the distinct impression that she now thinks she has the answers to all the inexplicable mysteries that continue to baffle many distinguished scientists well versed in the subject, and a few other million people besides. If you thought that was enough excitement for one letter, you would be wrong. She actually dared to quote the scientist and self-publicist Richard Dawkins, who openly professes his ignorance of psychical research, dismissing it as improbable and of no importance.

I have often wondered how much practical experience Susan has had in the manifestation of paranormal activity in its various forms. I would speculate that her experience in no way rivals the extraordinary events that I, and many of my colleagues in the Society, have faced at various times. Are we not in a better position to judge the reality of psychical phenomena, than the panel that adjudicated on the validity of that biased programme? Was there any reputable psychical researcher with practical experience present, who could have challenged her assessment that the evidence was "not good enough"?

In our subject we need well-directed scepticism to keep us on our toes, but have we now come to the stage in the assessment of serious psychical research, that the demands of journalism override the need for unbiased appraisal?

It certainly looks that way.

*Maurice Grosse.*