

Real Communication? Report on a SORRAT Letter-Writing Experiment

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Abstract — The general history and range of work conducted by a sitter group called “SORRAT” (Society for Research in Rapport and Telekenesis), which is based in Missouri with collaborators elsewhere in the world, is reviewed. Then an experiment conducted by the author with the help of SORRAT members is described. It involved writing questions on sheets of paper, sealing them in an envelope, and later receiving back that same envelope, apparently unopened. Upon opening the envelope, one or more *different* sheets were found inside, containing answers written by undetermined communicators to questions posed by some *other* SORRAT member. Sometimes objects were also discovered in the envelope. The complicated protocol is described, and possibilities of protection against fraud and contamination of information are assessed. Some of the “answers” are quoted and their contents discussed.

Keywords: sitter groups — communication — protocols — fraud

History and Background of the SORRAT Group

The days of large-scale physical phenomena, which so enthralled our Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, seem now a long way away, to the extent that reported cases are treated with suspicion even by those who are generally sympathetic to psychical research. An interesting and long-term case is the group called “SORRAT,” which was founded by John G. Neihardt (1882–1973), who made his career as a poet and literary critic after initial training in physics (Richards, 1973). Aware of such phenomena from his own youth, he worked quietly throughout his life until he felt ready to form this group in 1961 at his home at Skyrim Farm near Columbia, Missouri. “SORRAT” is his acronym for “Society for Research in Rapport and Telekinesis,” in that order; for central to his philosophy was that *rapport is the key to telekinetic processes*, an essential cause for the effects that take place. This has remained a key feature for the group.

When sittings were held, very large-scale phenomena soon occurred: apparently heavy furniture rose and fell, entire rooms shook, and tables went

Editor’s Note: This report is published as an ongoing modern example of classical spiritualist phenomena, but the reader should obviously be aware of the inherent limited experimental control. See the sections “Contaminants” and “Discussions” below.

walkabout into the farmyard. In his career, Neihardt had taught at the University of Missouri at Columbia; so the news spread there soon, and derision and persecution came back rapidly. From an early date, therefore, SORRAT has kept much to itself, while welcoming serious newcomers. The most substantial account to date is the book on the group by John Thomas Richards (born 1937), a teacher of English with an engineering background (Richards, 1982); since Neihardt's death he has coordinated much of the work of the group, maintaining the (informal) membership list and corresponding with members and others, and holding sittings in his own home in Rolla, about 100 miles from Columbia. These usually take place in the "Isolation Room," about 5 feet by 10 feet, located in the basement.

External appraisal has been rare. Hansen and Broughton (1991) found evidence of tampering with a pack of playing cards, while Wiseman and others (1992) decided, on statistical grounds, against a test involving the reading of a sealed pack. In a book on religious belief, the American sociologist James McClenon included SORRAT in a chapter on small sitter groups, but was rather agnostic about the probity of the events experienced, mainly because of his principal concern with belief structures rather than the events (McClenon 1994, Ch. 14). Berthold E. Schwarz (1994) drew more positive conclusions from his experiments on linking rings.

Schwarz's experiments were carried out in collaboration with Edward Cox, an associate of J. B. Rhine. Neihardt launched SORRAT experiments about 1966, in part with the encouragement of Rhine, who also suggested a new means of staging experiments: a glass container set on a wooden or metal base with a securely lockable lid, in which artifacts were placed and any phenomena observed without interference. Cox built the first such frame, which was known as a "Cox box"; since then the more informative name "minilab" has been attached to it, and it has been used elsewhere in psychical research. After moving to Rolla in 1978, Cox carried out over many years a wide range of experiments, such as rings linking and unlinking, balloons inflating, metal bending, and methods of alerting a film camera to the start of a phenomenon. Many of these experiments were carried out in the Isolation Room, using a minilab built with another SORRAT member and local resident, Steve Calvin. When Cox died in 1994, he had in large part written a book-length account of his work. It is currently in the hands of Schwarz, and apparently needs both editing and completion and a publisher. I never met Cox and have seen only the table of contents of his manuscript; so I shall not discuss it here.

Group Sittings

About the time of publication of his book in 1982, Richards and his wife Elaine visited Britain to lecture to the College of Psychic Studies and to meet members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). After meeting them, I became a member of the group and corresponded with Richards from time to time; but, being located so far away, I was not active. However, late in May

1996, I was able to spend three days at the Richards' home in Rolla. I discussed the work of the group with the family (they have a son Ivan, then aged 22 years) and with other SORRAT members, and took part in two sittings.

Because sittings form the central activity, it is appropriate to provide a description. The group conducts itself in a normal way on chairs in the Isolation Room: about seven members take part in a sitting, seated in loose chairs in a circle around a lightweight tray upon which the participant's hands are laid. The room is cast in total darkness, although some light may enter from elsewhere in the basement. The table moves around continuously but not smoothly, in a curious juddering way which I cannot imitate or fabricate afterwards. Communication is made by taps of the table on the floor, with 1 tap for the letter A, 2 for B, ... 26 for Z; in addition, the shorthand 1 for "yes," 2 for "no," and 3 for "well, sort of" is used. The taps are quite clear to hear and interpret; after noticing the use of louder ones to give emphasis, I designed some questions to encourage this response. If the sitters do not end a session themselves, it is terminated instantly by the taps "END."

I took part in sittings on two successive nights. The first one was arranged as an extra one for my benefit; but it was very disappointing, lasting less than 20 minutes, and producing no interesting discourse. But the regular sitting the next night lasted nearly an hour, with much exchange. The reason was that, after a couple of minutes, the table tapped out without warning "SAINT LEONARDS ROAD CHURCH." I live on a road called "Saint Leonard's Road" in Britain, and at its end there is a 12th-century church of most unusual design, with a round apse. The rest of the time in the sitting was taken up with questions (mainly from me) about the church and its history; many specific and obscure details were accurately furnished. For example, on asking for the name of the river in the valley below the church, I received the answer "BEAHN"; for some centuries the spelling "Beane" has been used, but this variant is a believable medieval version. Again, I was told that the church was located at the intersection of two ley lines, whose orientation and direction were very precisely specified; upon my return home I was able easily to locate them using dowsing rods. Of course the other SORRAT members knew nothing about this church or its history; and conversely, I was to find that the church officers knew nothing about ley lines!

The Letter-Writing Experiments

The letter-writing experiments started in 1981. They involve preparing questions on sheets of paper, placing them in an envelope and posting to Richards's home, and (by means to be described) receiving answers on the sheets written by unidentified sources. I shall name the latter "communicators," quite neutrally (discarnate entities, trance-state writers, the fraud squad for the ideological skeptics, whatever you wish), and report their information at face value. I read quite a few of the questions and answers from the copies in Richards's archive, and his book (1982) contains pertinent information. The

series of experiments proceeds under the general supervision of McClenon (not resident in Rolla), who intends to write an extensive study of the letters amassed; at the time of my experiments, about 1,600 letters had been exchanged.

This article is based upon a dozen of my own letters, handled under a protocol about to be described. The first two were prepared before my visit to Rolla (the second addressed to me and opened by me there); the next one was prepared there; and the rest were arranged over a period up to a lecture on SOR-RAT which I gave to the SPR on 13 February 1997. The information below is *not* based upon my second-rate memory; all the details are based upon notes and/or photocopies made at the time of action.

The Protocol Adopted

Normal Version

This is the protocol that I usually followed, with much concern paid to security. A few minor variants are indicated *in situ*.

1. Take a plain sheet of paper, and put on it the date and my small printed address label.
2. Number and write a sequence of questions, on any topic of my choice, leaving a space between each one for the answer.
3. Repeat for as many questions and sheets as I wish.
4. Keep a photocopy of the sheet(s) as a record.
5. Fold and place the sheet(s) in an envelope (hereafter named with capital letter "E"), and address it back to myself using my large printed address label.
6. Seal the envelope, write across the seal (this was done after the first envelope), and also place sticky tape over part or all of the seal and write across the tape (after the first three envelopes).
7. Affix U. S. postal stamps suitable for airmail return to Britain.
8. Place the envelope (on one occasion two of them) inside a larger envelope, and post that off to Richards.
9. Richards puts my envelope(s) in the Isolation Room; if Calvin comes to the house (less often since the death of Cox), then it may well go in the minilab, since he is the only member with keys for its padlocks.
10. Between three and five weeks after posting, the envelope comes back to me in the normal post. The front has been decorated with various colored stickers and ink-stamps, sometimes with an extra postage stamp or two, and a clock-like symbol (hereafter, the "logo") has been drawn near the top left hand corner with a felt tipped pen. The letter has been franked with the hand-operated stampers of some exotically named American township, such as Carefree (Arizona), Sublime (Texas) or Deadwood (South Dakota) — all genuine places, with cor-

rect postal codes. A small proportion of the letters are franked in Rolla. Some envelopes have been franked by automatic machine, the rest by the stamper, a few by both means.

- 11a. After examination for any indication that the envelope may have been previously opened, I open the envelope and find that a different sheet is inside (on one occasion three sheets), prepared by another SOR RAT member in the same way with name, address and date (the latter usually fairly close to that on my own sheets) followed by one or more questions separated by empty spaces. These are now filled with answers, written in a very distinctive hand in a felt tipped pen. Some times the envelope contains a little printed message from a Chinese fortune cookie, and/or fancy paper clips, and/or a plastic colored pointer imprinted either "MEDIUM" or "M. WELL." These latter are used by staff in American restaurants to help ensure that customers receive the correctly cooked steak; the play upon the word "medium" is good for rapport.
- 11b. In a variant of 11, sometimes I find in my envelope a letter written which was initiated by the communicators for another member, and so not an answer to any question; conversely, other members have received a few such letters intended for me. They are written on U. S. letter-size sheets which carry at the top, the logo mentioned in clause 10 above and the words "From The Isolation Room" printed in a nice font. These sheets were prepared at the initiative of one of the most active correspondents, Mrs. Elly Fithian (Colorado); she donated two reams of it to SORRAT, and it sits in a box in the Isolation Room.
12. I return each sheet to its author, keeping a photocopy if desired. I enclose also a photocopy of both sides of my envelope, retaining the original. In addition, I send a photocopy of both letter and envelope to Richards (for archiving) and to McClenon.
13. Similarly, my own sheet(s) have gone into others' envelopes, who send them back to me with photocopies of their own enclosing envelopes. Rapport has been effected, for members are reading each others' questions and answers.

The Variant Protocol at Rolla

My third letter was prepared at Rolla. I wrote five questions on five numbered A5-sized sheets of paper, and placed them in an air-mail envelope which I sealed and wrote across the seal but did not tape it (the idea of this extra security came to me later); so far, normal. Since Calvin came to the house to meet me, I was able to put the envelope in the minilab and lock it myself. In addition, Fithian regularly sends batches of ten open, empty, stamped and self-addressed envelopes, each one numbered in the same way; Richards places them on the bench in the Isolation Room upon which the minilab sits. I found there a

full set, carrying encircled numbers from 1 to 10; so I also put envelopes 1–4 in the minilab with my own envelope, and left Fithian's others on the bench.

My envelope arrived in the post at my home on 10 June 1996, 19 days after its preparation. It had been franked in Sublime (Texas) on 3 June. Inside was one sheet, a letter written by Fithian on 13 May. My five sheets came to me, in the normal way, a few days later; the first had gone to another active member, Mrs. Alisa Butler (New Mexico), and the other four sheets had been sent to Fithian in her envelopes 4 and 5 — that is (and itself part of the information, I imagine), one envelope put inside the minilab and one left outside it.

A Variant Layout

For envelopes 7 and 8, instead of writing a question and leaving a space, I typed out a long list of questions one after the other, and affixed several pages of blank sheets upon which the communicators could write answers as long as they wished without being constrained by space provided. The questions for each envelope were grouped by topic, and numbered in the manner 'm.n' (topic m, question n) in one sequence for the two envelopes.

The sheet containing questions 7/1–6.3 came back unmarked, with the answers written upon Isolation Room sheets; my blank sheets were used for a long general essay. The sheet with questions 8/7.1–13.3 came back twice: the copy I had put in the envelope, and one sent to Richards for information which he had then put in the Isolation Room. The answers written upon them were unavoidably short, and were prefaced by a request to return to the normal manner of exchange, with which I complied. The main answers were written out *seriatim* on the blank sheets that I had provided.

Two Envelopes for a Lecture

I prepared envelope 10 on 19 November 1996 in preparation of my lecture to the SPR the following February: to this end, instead of addressing it to myself at home, I addressed it to me care of Eleanor O'Keeffe, secretary of the SPR at its London office. Requesting confidentiality, I sent her photocopies of the front and the back of the envelope and the tops of the three sheets inside containing my five questions, and desired her to sign and date these copies. If the envelope came back in time for the lecture, I asked her to sign and date it on the back, place it with the photocopies, inform me by telephone, and bring it along to the lecture for opening there in front of the audience. The letter came back within a month, all envelopes involved being franked at Carefree (Arizona) on 11 December. This was much faster than I had expected; so I prepared a repeat on 30 December with envelope 11 (four sheets, six questions). This too came back a week before the lecture, all envelopes franked at Waxahachie (Texas) on 30 January. Hence two openings were available for the audience.

In the lecture I asked for volunteers whom I did not know personally or at least only by sight. Each carefully opened his envelope along a short edge using

scissors supplied by me, and in each case found just one sheet. I asked the volunteer to read out just the name of the author and date on the sheet; the contents could be confidential.

Envelope 10 contained a letter of 1 November which had been sent over by another active member, one of the few British ones, Mrs. Olga Mathews; I had come to know her because her letter and my letter had been swapped in my first experiment. (When I got home after my lecture, I found at the bottom of the envelope four little cat decorations that had not been stuck on the envelope itself — the first such enclosure for me, and very striking for a cat fanatic!) My three original sheets had come back to me in December, *via* Butler, Mathews and Fithian.

Envelope 11 contained a letter by Schwarz, dated 16 December; he had been sent two of my four sheets, and I had received them from him two days before the lecture. The other two sheets arrived the day afterwards; they had gone in two separate envelopes to Butler.

Tabular Summary

Table 1 records the details of procedure for each of the twelve sealed envelopes. Excluded are the two for-Butler envelopes just mentioned, and a letter on Isolation Room sheets which came to me *via* another SORRAT member. The key should be clear from the account above; most of my letters have gone to the four members mentioned earlier, then the most active participants in this experiment. The sign “+” in the column of recipients indicates that consecutively numbered sheets went to the same person (usually Fithian) but in different envelopes.

I shall summarize and sometimes quote questions and answers, citing each pair in the manner “N/M,” meaning question M in envelope N. (When M = 7 or M = 8, M takes the form “m.n.”) The sheet containing 9/3 did not come back, presumably because of indolence on the part of the recipient (whoever it was) or an error in the post. “N/Bloggs” refers to a question asked by Bloggs on a sheet which I received in envelope N; “Another” indicates a SORRAT member other than the four named earlier. I quote some of my questions and the communicators’ answers; my editorial additions to the latter are made in *curled* brackets {}, since they occasionally deployed square ones. I preserve their own use of underlining. A few exchanges are transcribed in an appendix; if one is mentioned in the intervening discussion, I have added an asterisk “*” to the reference.

I shall now review various features of the envelopes and sheets, and the questions and answers. Normally there are two aspects of the work: the protocol, especially security controls; and the content of the answers. But in my experiments the distinction is not sharp, since many of my questions concerned the protocol itself.

TABLE I
Letters, February 1996 – February 1997

EN No.	Day & Month Prepared	Franked at	Dates		Preparation, Condition	Letter Inside, Date
			Franked	Received		
1	16.2	Deadwood (SD)	18.3	24.3		Mat, 23.2
2	21.4	Spiritwood (ND)	6.5	24.5 ¹	XS FC	Sch, 19.4
3	23.5 ¹	Sublime (TX)	3.6	10.6 ¹		Fit, 13.5
4	7.6	Transylvania (LA)	8.7	14.7	SS XSs	Ano, 23.5
5 Staples	2.7	Deadwood (SD)	15.7	27.7	SS XSs	Ano, 27.6
5 No Staples	2.7	Deadwood (SD)	15.7	25.7	SS BR ¹ XS	Mat, no date (BR)
6	4.7	Spiritwood (ND)	31.7	8.8	SS BR XS	IR for Ano
7	5.8	Deadwood (SD)	29.8	10.9	SS BR XSs	Ano, no date
8	1.9	Transylvania (LA)	23.9	11.10 ¹	SS	IR for Mat; Fit, 8.9; But, 8.9
9	28.10	Deadwood & Rapid City (SD) ¹	19.11	25.11 ²	SS ³	Fit, 4.11
10	19.11	Carefree (AZ)	11.12	17.12 ¹	SS BR ²	Mat, 1.11 (BR) ³
11	30.12	Waxahachie (TX)	30.1	4.2 ¹	SS BR ²	Sch, 10.12 (BR ²)

Key

Ano	Another SORRAT member	FC(s)	Fortune cookie(s)
BR	Signs of burning	Fit	Fithian
But	Butler	IR(s)	Isolation Room (sheet(s))
EN	Envelope	Mat	Mathews

TABLE 1 (Continued)
Letters, February 1996 – February 1997

No. of my QUs	SHs	Receipt of SHs, in sheet-no. order	Notes
2	1	Mat1	
3	1	Sch1	¹ EN received and opened at Rolla
5	5	But1; Fit4 (in 2 ENs)	¹ Placed by me in minilab at Rolla ² Seal tampered for about 1 inch
3	2	Fit1(SM)+1(FC) (in 2 ENs)	
6	4 ¹	Fit4 ²	¹ Four SHs 'NoSt' stapled up by error ² Sheets received still stapled
4	3	But1(FC SM); Fit1+1	¹ Sheet 3 stapled to EN
5	3 ¹	Fit1(BR) + 2(BR)	¹ SH1 = 2 postcards and SH stuck together
27	1 ¹ + 7 7 IRs ¹	Fit1(=QU)+1+ 1(FC) + 1(FC) + 1(FC)+1; But2(FC) Fit1(rose, ² FC)+1(FC)+3; But1(FC); Fit1	¹ QU + 7 blank SHs, containing essay; answers on IRs (see next row) ² An artificial one!
18	2+5	Fit2(QU, 1, SM)+1 +2 ² +QU	¹ EN opened after visit to USA ² Incomplete after last SH
10	6	1+? ³ +1+1+1(FC); But1	¹ Two postmarks on EN ² EN tampered about 2 inches ³ Sheet 2 never returned
5	3	But1; Mat 1 (FC); Fit1 (PC)	¹ Received at SPR; opened at lecture ² US Post strip and sticky tape on EN ³ Also 4 cat decorations inside EN
6	4	But (FCs); Sch; But (FC); Sch(FC)	¹ Received at SPR; opened at lecture ² BR <i>not</i> only on edge of EN and SH

Key (continued)

PC	Paper clip	SM	Steak marker
QU	My typed question sheet	SS	Sealed with sticky tape
Sch	Schwarz	XS(s)	Extra postage stamp(s)
SH(s)	Sheet(s)		

Documentary Features

Envelopes

As mentioned in clause 13 of the protocol, the exchange of letters among envelopes takes place batch-like when several are available. One reason for adopting this method is “ ψ economy; it takes as much energy to answer and mail one letter as it does for a dozen. The other {reason} is to broaden the possibilities of interactions among the people still in the meat (in physical bodies), who get and ethically send the letters, thus helping one another on your side, too” (13/4).

A stamping device of the U.S. Post Office may have been acquired by an outsider and the letters introduced somehow into the postal system after franking. For well-known commercial reasons, this would not be easy, though not impossible. The issue is not major, however, since the principal concern is the contents of the letters contained therein.

Some of the extra postage stamps are out of legal tender (my first one, on envelope 2, was a 10 centimes stamp for the Belgian Congo); the philatelist company Stanley Gibbons told me that such stamps are not hard to obtain from dealers. Regarding the decorative stickers, “One of our temporary solid agents purchased them at K-Mart” (8/Fithian).

Execution of the Answers

The communications are all written with a felt tipped pen in black or blue ink. The handwriting has not changed for many years; the communicators say that it is that of John King, an English buccaneer of the 17th century who “acts as ‘secretary,’ as he did to Sir Henry Morgan” (7/2.1: on Morgan, see Richards (1982), 151). King defends his former profession on the ground that “pirates are no different from Rhodes scholars, dustmen, or members of the Chamber of commerce. Some are kind and some are cruel. Some are smart and some are dumb” (3/Schwarz). No handwriting has been positively identified.

The logo on the envelopes is also drawn with this type of pen; an example is shown in Figure 1. I wondered if it symbolized American Indian cosmology in some way (Neihardt was an expert on the Sioux tribe, being elected to the Oglala branch in 1931). However, I was told that, as “symbolic on our side,” the circle represents “the handless clock,” the bow-tie is the (Western) symbol for infinity, and the arrow is indeed “pointing upwards” (7/2.9). In response to my follow-up question, “we exist outside of space, so the infinity sign symbolizes that. The arrow points upwards, which indicates a desire to raise our [and all willing others’] spiritual level” (13/1).

Signatories

Figure 2 shows a typical sheet with one question and answer (11/1),



3 Inches

My
postal
stamp

Interior burns

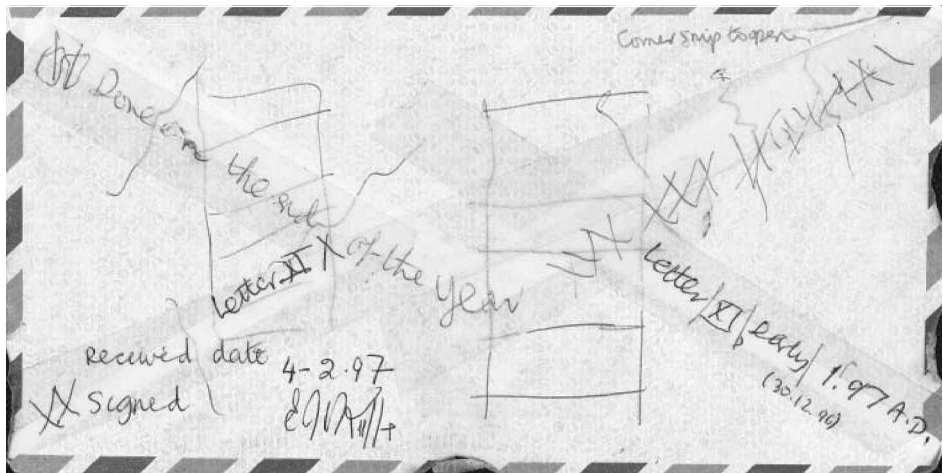


Fig. 1. Front and back of envelope 11. On the back, my diagonal writing crossed both diagonal seals, which were then covered with sticky transparent tape; then I made the two rectangular marks and some other squiggles over the sticky tape and onto the envelope. Miss O'Keeffe's signature of receipt is at the bottom left. The exterior black lines show the extent of burning along the edges. During the lecture the envelope was opened along the left-hand edge.

Rec. from Butler 11.4.97

Qn. X1.1 The existence of your replies and activities suggests ~~to~~ to us living beings that the survival hypothesis is correct, you being the evidence. Reincarnation, however, is a further hypothesis. Does it actually happen? Specifically, have any of you come back to inhabit a later living soul? An earlier living soul? 1

Friend Ivor-

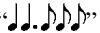
One is always given a choice.

Karma is a human concept based on the notion of balanced justice.

Some choose to reincarnate. Others choose to remain on our side — either incarnating once, or never taking a physical form. And, YES, some choose transmigration; trying their luck at non-human lives. Shanti-
 explicator / Pector / JK

Fig. 2. A typical A5 sheet, with one question and answer, from envelope 11. The receipt note at the top was written in pencil by me later.

including the flourish and several signatories. The latter are always multiple: here “J.K.” is King. Among other signatories “WEC” is Cox, and “lllxlll” Cox’s friend “three-times-three”; however, I was told, “we have no patent on lllxlll’s signature raps. Anyone can do it, who has never encountered lllxlll, with no intention of imposture. This is chance” (5/Another).

The signatories “are offices and functions, held in rotation, with some newcomers being included. Dr. McClenon can send you a copy of our organizational chart” (7/2.1). Thus, on another occasion (6/1) the flourish read “Rector/Expedito/B. E./J. K.”, where “B. E.” is Neihardt’s friend Black Elk, whose rhythm “” I heard several times, on our request, in the Richards’ house and during our sittings. I doubt that much significance can be put on the names; in my small collection I have not found any obvious correlation between signatories of a letter and the content of its answers. No doubt McClenon will cast light on this matter in his study in preparation of the full experiment.

Contaminants

Opening the Envelopes

The most obvious possibility of fraud is that an envelope has been opened and resealed before posting; it is for this reason that I sealed, wrote across the sealing and used sticky tape. The only case of such tampering is envelope 3, where for about 1 inch the writing does not quite match up. I was told that “It is obviously difficult to manipulate matter without tearing or otherwise tampering with it, if it is made of a flimsy material. It would work far better if we did not have to unseal and reseal envelopes. Besides, you will never persuade any of the septic skeptics that we exist, so elaborate precautions to “prove” paranormality are always going to be futile” (4/1). In reply, I explained that “I do this sealing NOT to convince the septic skeptics but to try to understand the physical parameters and constraints between you and me” (8/12.2), but I received no response.

In addition, the flap of Envelope 9 shows a jagged tear of about 2 1/2 inches, which has been taped down by another hand (probably that of a U. S. or a British postal service worker); however, my own taping seems not to have been disturbed, like all the other such envelopes (from 4 onwards) where it was applied. In addition, in neither case is the opening large enough to allow for normal extraction of my sheets; and I am sure that they have not been twirled out, because if so then they would exhibit the well-known hysteresis-like effect of curling.

Burning

Far more serious is the burning. As with other correspondents, some of my envelopes come back scorched, usually along one or more edges. With

envelope 11, shown in Figure 2, burning also occurred in two interior places. The locations of the burns are marked on the figure by exterior lines; as with tampering, they are too small to allow extraction of the sheets without severe curling. The sheet found inside was also burnt along edges and interior. Envelope 10 was burnt along the right short edge, so wide extra sticky tape was applied; presumably it was done as a repair by the U. S. Post Office, since partly over on the front of the envelope is a white strip carrying markings like barcoding, which they put on envelopes quite often (several of those containing my sheets carry them). Only in envelope 6 was my own sheet burnt, perhaps because (for reasons not described here) it was composed of two postcards taped together with a small sheet also taped on to make up a writing surface.

By contrast, in my fifth experiment burning occurred substantially enough to admit fraud. The circumstances were as follows. I prepared two envelopes and each time my first question requested that the sheets inside each envelope come back to me inside the other one. I received back two polite refusals, on the reasonable grounds that rapport would not be engendered. In one case I stapled four sheets together and kept three others loose, and formed two Envelopes named “5St” (for “Stapled”) and “5NoSt” respectively. (Annoyingly, I then put each set of sheets in the other envelope, which has much perplexed me since but has not invalidated the experiment as such.) Of the three loose sheets placed inside envelope 5St, one was wider than the other two and so went to the bottom of the envelope; as an afterthought, I stapled it to the envelope itself in two places and taped over those staples (a postal requirement).

Envelope 5NoSt came back with no signs of tampering or burning, and containing an Isolation Room sheet addressed to another SORRAT member. It had contained the four stapled sheets, which came back still stapled together in one Fithian envelope. The three loose sheets in 5St came back in three envelopes (1 *via* Butler, and two *via* Fithian including the stapled sheet undamaged); but the envelope itself was burnt right along one short side and also exactly where the external staples had been applied.

In addition, an extra large address label of mine had been used to secure the new contents of the envelope (a letter from Mathews). Puzzled by its appearance, I enquired of Richards and learnt that he had put in the Isolation Room extra labels which I had sent to him to use on *his own* envelopes to post to me, in the normal way; so one of them must have been used, whether fraud was committed or not. Later, two of these labels were affixed to two of Richards’s own envelopes (which he puts in the Isolation Room from time to time) to send me two letters sent to the communicators by Butler.

Causes of the Burning?

On seeking reasons for the burning, I was told that my sealing of the envelopes was inconvenient. “As you observe, we did botch the removal of the staples of this letter {5NoSt}, and the {onion-skin} paper Olga Matthews {sic} used was easy to ignite as the molecules passed through the edge of the

envelope which had already been exposed to a temperature of nearly 472°F when the metal staples were removed” (5St/1). “The sketch and letter were apported simultaneously, from a temporal frame of reference. The heavy onion-skin paper ignited more easily than did the paper” on which the letter was written (7/4.2: “apported” means “transported over distance”). Inspired by this explanation and similar one (5NoSt/1), and also by the jerky motions of the table during our sittings mentioned earlier, I suggested that, assuming apportage to be taking place, the burning was caused by the very rapid and short lateral vibrations of sheet and/or envelope as the former moved in or out of the latter, and that heat was generated by friction at the intersection of the edges of both. My suggestion was accepted with the following explanation (9/9-10):

We do not live in the physical realm of “reality,” but outside of spacetime. We use ψ energy to create vibrations in the bonding on a subatomic level. Thus, we tend to move objects “jerkily,” since much ψ must be controlled and the control is a trifle imprecise. This can lead to molecules impinging upon other molecules. To simplify, this can cause heat to build, and if the heat reaches 451° Fahrenheit, the paper will char, smoulder, and, if oxygen is present, it will ignite. This is why we dislike passing paper though paper, and prefer envelopes which are not sealed. Besides, sealing hurts rapport.

This is very ample; does the quoted temperature come from Ray Bradbury’s famous novel? The statement does not contradict the earlier one about sealing and resealing envelopes, since both procedures seem to be used.

The issue of burning is important for the Richards family, and not only as an ethical matter. Quite a number of letters have been sealed, so that burnt or even charred items have been found in the Isolation Room: thus they are naturally fearful that a major blaze could spread from the basement to the whole house. At their request, therefore, envelopes 12 onwards have not been sealed and their contents are not reported here.

Contents of the Answers

Expression

The answers always come in connected and comprehensible English. Some words come in both English and American spellings (for example, “sceptic” and “skeptic”); there is a curious but maybe accidental absence of words with specifically American spelling, such as “favor.” The language seems English rather than American, with occasional exceptions such as the verb “mail” rather than “post”; John King’s English nationality and alleged time of living may play roles here, even if he is only scribe rather than informant. Occasionally, individual numbers or textual letters are over-written, or a word is misspelt or -written; otherwise there is a remarkable absence of scribal errors such as deleted (parts of) words. At times the literary quality of the communications is rather good.

Languages

Occasionally I asked questions in French, German or Italian, and always received relevant answers, in English. Apparently at Rolla, SORRAT members have posed questions in Korean and Chinese, with the same outcome. However, my requests for *answers* in foreign languages were rejected, on the grounds that “this would confuse most readers who receive letters in their envelopes” (7/2.2; compare 5St/3). Finding this answer weak, I requested again, but was given a similar answer (8/7.2), and also this remark on my typed question sheet: “We do not usually do this.” It was prefaced by the Russian for “yes/no,” not quite correctly written in either the Imperial or Soviet alphabets; so perhaps their refusal is well judged.

As exemplified above, occasionally a (part) question was not answered, whether by accident or design. A few times I asked the same question twice, even in the same letter. For example, I sought the reaction of the mathematician P. de Fermat (1601-1665) about the recent proof of his so-called “last theorem” and details of the proof that he (thought that he had) found in his lifetime (7/3.6 in French and 7/6.2 in English). Each second time an answer was given, with no reference to the earlier one: first, “We shall try to find out. Please do not hop from language to language,” and then “We shall certainly ask him to go to your home and let you know his apparent proof.” As with all questions involving other dead persons, no follow-up has occurred. However, they are aware of repetitions; for example, “We are curious as to your motivation in asking the same questions again” (7/Another).

Identification

The most positive and insistent responses from the communicators, apparently also to many other correspondents and even in response to questions which are not directly relevant, are that they are the surviving residues (my word) of dead persons, and that they operate independently of our restrictions of space and time. For example, “Remember that Our Side is vast in space, time, and outside physical/temporal dimensions, and many are here!” (4/Another). — In response to my query as to whether “you need rapport to effect your communications with us, as we do here to be in touch with you? Do you ever get bored of all this contact with us?” came the answer: “We are completely free, outside of spacetime. We pass our eternity as we benevolently please. If an individual wishes, yes to each {question}!” (7/3.3). The answer shown in Figure 1 contains further information. The essay* that came with envelope 7 ruminated at length on consequences of this situation, adopting an anti-materialistic stance. It also contains, in the middle, the only use of the first person singular in my letters; normally, and perhaps to stimulate rapport, the first person plural was deployed.

Knowledge of Psychology and of Psychological Research

Concerning the quantity of phenomena at Rolla, which seems to be greater than with most other sitter groups, “They do happen in many other places in space and time, and the Isolation Room is where Ed Cox set up experiments investigating ψ events. Besides, habituation helps present ownership resistance and overcomes cognitive dissonance” (3/1).

This answer shows familiarity with psychological theory; and the communicators certainly know of sitter groups. For example (8/9.1-2), “yes, the cross-correspondences were interesting, and raised some questions,” while

D. D. Home was able to levitate his body, handle hot coals, *etc.*, through his own ψ ability, an ability which is normal for human beings and other sentient creatures. Home could control this. In this, he was different from those who do not have the inborn knack of using ψ .

They also suggested this experiment:

However, it might be more useful to have a secure test message, perhaps the first line on the page of a book, and see if one medium after another could speak the line correctly, {one} word at a time. This would include distant-viewing of a target object through clairvoyance.

On more recent cases, I asked about Kenneth Batchelor’s group (Batchelor 1979); the communicators both picked up my deliberate misspelling “Bachelton” and approved of his use of “artifact induction. If it overcomes ownership resistance {sic} and the ψ is free to flow from those in the flesh, it works” (8/10.4). Concerning the group that A. R. G. Owen set up in Toronto in the 1960s and which created an entity called “Philip” (Owen & Sparrow, 1977), I received the erudite answer: “Yes, Owen certainly was right about the creation of a tulpa{thought-form}. However, in this case, an ordinary low-level pretended to be Santa Claus [Father Christmas] and the fictional Philip,” thus posing as two personalities. “That is the problem with this technique, as Alexandra David-Neel found in Tibet” (5St/2: she described her research, in, for example, the book by David-Neel, 1931). Unaware of the existence of low-levels, I sought explanation and learned that they “are people who have not progressed. They tend to give answers that people want, and feel a need for recognition. Some are on our side and some are still in the flesh (7/3.5).”

The communicators failed the following test of telepathy; perhaps they did not realize what was involved. Twice I asked if my fears about the possible outcome of the Cuba crisis of 1962 had been justified. At the time they concerned a specific kind of technical malfunction of which I was aware of in my current work in the British “defence” industry, but which I did *not* mention in my questions. The first answer was the reasonable but generalized comment

that the crisis was “a near thing” (7/6.1), followed by the view that it “could easily have escalated into a global war (9/5).”

Discussion

Modal Logic Ad Absurdum: Might be Fraud, Must be Fraud

I shall not commit the fashionable stupidity of regarding everything I cannot explain as a fraud.

— Carl Jung (Collected works, Vol. 8, 317)

Psychical research is well known to inspire quasi-paranoid schizophrenic reactions even among its practitioners: wonder tinged with worry in case something “big” has actually happened. Thus the derision of outsiders to the claims of SORRAT is not surprising. However, the usual “rational” skeptic solution — since it might be fraud, then it must be fraud — of course kills off intelligent discussion of any activity, including science itself (for “fraud” read “mistaken,” or “wrongly interpreted,” or whatever is convenient). This is the stupidity of credulous hostility, opposite to the stupidity of credulous belief. Both stances are irrefutable, *and thus unscientific*. It determines, for example, that such an experienced researcher as Cox was an idiot for over two decades. Let us seek some middle ground in assessing the letter-writing experiments.

Fraud and its Guard

The sealing of envelopes is essential for any kind of control: while itself not foolproof, of course, it demands of possible fraudsters considerable skills at undetectable alteration which would have to prevail for at least five of mine. An expert in the examination of artifacts for fraud kindly examined these five envelopes, and strongly doubted that all of my means of protection had been circumvented. The experiment would be worth repeating with tamper-proof envelopes, although the risk of fire in the Isolation Room would be increased. Quite a lot of envelopes over the years have been sealed, although many not since the SORRAT correspondents are often concerned with the content of the answers rather than the processes in obtaining them.

Further, if this sequence of experiments is an entire fraud, then one has to ponder its *scale*: about 1,600 letters over 16 years at the time of my experiments, with *nobody* hitherto “confessing” to the sin. In any case, confessions in this field have been known to be fraudulent themselves. The main focus falls upon the Richards; they deny any deceit, and having met them and talked in detail with them, I accept that. There does seem to be psychical “ability” in the family, especially with Elaine, but no apparent desire to effect fraud (and probably not the forensic skills either) or to sustain it for so many years. If

other SORRAT members are involved, then they must be acting with the Richards' conscious collusion, and on a large measure.

However, there are factors which argue against the veracity of the evidence, or at least would simplify somewhat the task of fraud or of trance communication. They include the generalized nature of several answers, and the lack of follow-up from other dead persons such as Fermat. On the other hand, I am heartened by the readiness of the communicators to admit incompetence in conducting their side of the experiments (not only this one) and ignorance of topics raised in questions. A common mistake made on our side about discarnate or other intelligent beings is that they are assumed to be omniscient concerning their own circumstances and science: the assumption is gratuitous, and socially ignorant in assuming that "they" are all the same while we are very different. While fraud is certainly not eliminated here, belief in it makes quite high demands.

Interpretation of the Answers

Does one "believe" the answers received? The question is subtler than it seems. As with many other sources of psychical communication, while the answers are written in a categorical form, they seem to assume some belief system or canonically accepted framework. For example, Fithian's question "Did Jesus dematerialize his body after he died?" received the answer "Yes" (3/Fithian). Now there are historical reasons to think that Jesus did not die upon the cross (see, for example, Thiering, 1993); so words like "resurrection" are interpreted differently by followers of orthodox and of apocryphal Christianity. (Note that it was only asserted that the crucifixion occurred, which both traditions affirm, not that Jesus died then.) Thus such answers may be facts or assertions of belief. Sometimes an answer may be a sincere fantasy of a communicator. But in none of these cases is the *paranormality* of the letter exchange compromised.

Other "Worlds?"

If this experiment involves a genuine case of contact with the ex-living, then presumably interaction with other universes is involved. More precisely, the physics of the communicators interacts with ours so that the envelopes come under both systems simultaneously. The letters are answered, and in my case also envelopes are opened, by physical means unavailable to us but to which they have access. While the envelopes and letters never leave our physics, they become subject to theirs. As the communicators put it (3/4),

The Isolation Room is quite sufficient, though we could transport letters elsewhere to write them. We prefer the privacy of an unoccupied room, since some tense people have become upset when they see a pen standing on end and writing with no visible hand attached. However, this certainly is not our fault. We try to create as little cognitive dissonance as we can.

Note that apparently the answers are written down in some normal(ish!) way, not imprinted on the sheets, like thoughtography; similarly, questions are presumably “seen” and “read” rather than just cognized.

However, my hypothesis did not gain support from the communicators. When I asked them if there “is just one ‘world’ over there, or several? Are you in one, and communicating in ways like this with other ones?”, I was told that “The ‘world’ is a unified whole, your side and ours” (8/13.2). In answers to other correspondents they have claimed our universe to be only part of some larger totality. Note, however, their mention of “universes” early in the essay* with envelope 7 (in the course of a clear advocacy of the interaction of mind with body). Maybe this equivocation over universe(s) is evidence of unclarity on their side about their side. Again, in reply to my earlier query about their use of words like “physics” and “thermodynamics” (7/4.1), I was told, rather weakly, that

One set of laws does not dominate over another. The parameters are merely different. A heavy table and a light one matter ethically in case the ψ fails and the heavy table brains a chap in his skin.

The communicators also seem to misunderstand the theories of parallel universes which often obtains on our side among skeptics and believers alike. Rational science need have *no* difficulty in admitting the existence of such universes *if no physical interaction with ours is claimed to occur*. The fret arises with the *interaction itself*: its form and nature, and the manner in which domination of one over another occurs.

Other Possibilities

If we have here a case of trance-state automatism, then it is on the scale of Mrs. Curran and her personality Patience Worth. Incidentally, the communicators interpret this case conversely from that in Prince (1927), as “hybridization {sic} when someone long ‘dead’ has kept up with the vernacular of later ages and incorporated it into his or her speech” (8/9.4); maybe not incidentally, Neihardt knew Prince, and helped Casper Yost with his experiments with Mrs. Curran (9/8*).

Other Kinds of Experiment Effected by the SORRAT Group

Other Media

So far communication has been confined largely to letter-writing, although apparently Cox gained some success with experiments where the communicators were asked to impose regular clicks onto an audio cassette. Experiments using videotape have, I understand, not been successful. I put an initialized floppy disc in the post, but there was nothing in it when it came back. I was not

surprised, for I had been told already that “We cannot yet use e-mail. Maybe some day there may be a web site for us, but we do not feel comfortable with this too-easy form of communication — albeit some on our side do like it” (8/9.4).

Psychic Photography

A long sequence of experiments has been successfully carried out since about 1986, though under no general director. The protocol follows exactly that for the letters, except that rolls of film are used and photographs found on them after processing. I have tried two slide films and three print films; one of the first slide set and most of one of the print set were blanks, but the rest produced sharp pictures, taken by some camera with attached or mounted flash. Most show scenes in the Isolation Room, with various objects seen suspended or in motion in mid air. The most striking pictures are a quartet of prints; successfully fulfilling a request of mine (9/4), they *clearly* show a horizontal black film canister located *through* the vertical front glass wall of the minilab — that is, partly inside the lab and otherwise outside it. Figure 3 is one of this quartet, showing the canister in the middle. I know that my roll of film was



Fig. 3. Photograph of a film canister located across a wall of the minilab, undoubtedly the one in the Isolation Room at the Richards' home. The rest of the image was the first photograph on the film, taken by me in my study. It includes part of an appliqué embroidery made by my wife and hanging in a window; most of the rest of that shot was of a typically grey cloudy British sky, an ideally neutral background for further imagery to be cast in Rolla!

used; for the quartet was taken on frames which I had *already* shot in my own study before winding back the film into the canister and exposing the leader stub. The purpose of this procedure was to *identify* the film returned to me; naturally, I did not mention it to Richards.

Among other experiments, in May 1997 I sent more than five sheets of fresh photographic paper (for reasons explained previously, the containing envelope was not sealed) and received them back in the usual indirect way, *via* another British SORRAT member. The images on the paper were only curved lines or circles, one maybe of a curricular object; so no conclusions can be drawn about their creation. On the versos the communicators explained that “This is a unique and very difficult task,” indeed “more difficult than we supposed,” and that “we have not had much success.”

Concluding Remark: Other Kinds of Experiment and Situations

This final confession is a suitable cue to speculate on other possibilities for experiment. The minilab has been used by other SORRAT members to set up various physical arrangements; Figure 3 shows some objects in the minilab at the time of its taking. One possibility for a chemist would be to place appropriate chemicals in sealed containers and request that some new substance be prepared from them in a supplied dish or flask, the whole ensemble being placed in a minilab of its own, and that put inside a larger minilab. Means of recording any activity could be added: in his own work Cox arranged a camera which was triggered into action by sensors in such circumstances. Analogous biological, medical, or technological experiments could be devised.

Another variant would be to use venues different from the Isolation Room, vulnerable as it is (for whatever reason) to fire in the basement of a private house. However, presumably because of rapport, it seems that the occurrences of events in that room are associated with the other activities of the SORRAT group in the house (and earlier in Neihardt’s time, at Skyrim Farm). Maybe some other sitter group, or interested scientific parties, could attempt to replicate the experiments reviewed in this paper and set up an Isolation Room nearby in a more controllable environment.

For now let me suggest that the letter-writing experiment seems to make available a large and detailed means of communication of some non-normal kind. Neihardt, little known even to the historians of psychical research, appears to have been a major innovator. How did he achieve such a breakthrough? He “replied that it was not only not so bad, but not a change for him to treat us as who we are, real people who happen to be dead (9/8*).”

Appendix: Four Selected Texts

The order of the following texts is numerical-chronological. The questions (“Q”) are numbered in the manner used in the article; on the sheets I may have written, say, just “10” or “IV2.” The orthography of the answers (“A”) has

been preserved, including the square brackets, occasional misspelling and the use of underlining. My insertions in the questions and answers are again in curled brackets. Explanatory comments are added at the end of each text.

1) Q5NoSt/4 {dated 2 July 1996} What will be the UK National Lottery for the week beginning Sunday October 13th 1996?

A. We do not approve of wagering and making money. [The fact that we tell many participants, who try this, that moral fact, has certainly decreased the number of letters that are involved!]

Comment. This is the common answer to such questions in communications; anticipating it was the reason for my asking.

2) 7/{Essay on the sheets supplied by me with the typed question sheet in envelope 7}.

Friend Ivor -

We are pleased that you have shown an interest in this experiment. You will find it frustrating when you are put into the position of trying to convince a skeptic that we have an existential, real existence, instead of being the fond fulminations of some credulous fool's brain — but the notions of those who are prejudiced against us are really of no concern. The CSICOP chaps insult us by denying that we exist at all. We are more charitable, in that we affirm that the people who dislike us do exist — unfortunately, they exist. Ironically, when they die, they do still exist.

Now, the point is immaterial, which is not just a pun, but we exist. We think we exist; therefore we think we exist. The nature of our existence is the same as the nature of any thought. Too, as thoughts can be put into action, and action can “do work,” then we can affect both the moral and the physical universe — or, rather, multiverses — and logically result in measurable changes in the physical objects used to measure such alterations. Of course, whatever theory one propounds will doubtless skew the outcome of such tests, since thought is basic to theory and affects outcome. The hoary old example of Schrodinger's {sic} Cat is a parable expressing this ambivalent truth.

In the past, people, on both sides of the change correctly called death, have attempted to relay information, and receive it, in order to comprehend the laws involved in bridging the gap between one side and the other. One primary frustration has been the fact that there are all levels and kinds of comprehension involved. Although we can speak the same language, the vocabularies can vary widely. As an instance, to us, a paradox is virtually impossible, and a symbol can be viewed as solid and quite literal.

Beauty is “visible” as an inward quality, not merely, or only, in the eye of a beholder. Berkeley's tree does echo forever in its forest from a point of vantage outside of time, and distance is only an idea outside of space — with the added complication [or simplification] that time and space are part of one physical

nexus. Therefore, neither space nor time can be considered vital to our side's existence. Poe spoke of "the Monarch Thought's dominion," and he was not far wrong in that notion, although sanity and its reverse do not play much of a critical role here.

Additionally, we are outside of the common myths as controlling parameters. As an instance, some people visualize us as living on planes — I do not mean pilots and passengers, but planes of reality, rather like the layers of a huge onion. What nonsense, when you think about it!

Others imagine that there are vibrations in the interstellar gasses {sic} which carry our beings or messages about. While that beats pearly gates and bubbling lava as home sweet home in the by-and-by, it is just as much a materialistic assumption.

The notions about "Summerland" are limited to what mortals would desire.

As for the boundaries, or rules we have to follow, they are not physical, but moral. Kindness is more valuable than platinum, obviously. Helping others is as admirable on our side as on yours.

We have no physical laws, because we are not physical beings. That which we think, is.

Kind benevolence is bracing. Mean malice is dimming or diminishing. However, you already know this.

Shanti -

Imperator/Explicator/J.K.

Comments: (1) "Berkeley" refers to the idealist philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753). (2) Summerland apparently refers to some sites accessible to psychics; see Richards (1982), p. 254. (3) Presumably "Poe" is the writer Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849); I have not found the text cited.

3) Q9/7 How do you (plural) keep a record of all your answers to all of us?

A. Friend Ivor —

While not every one of us cares to do this, for practical purposes, anyone who wants to view the "records," as you can call them, can look in the files of Dr. McClenon or Dr. Richards. Since each should be given a xexoxed {sic} duplicate of each letter one receives in his or her envelope, whoever needs an answer can go to either pile of papers for the year and look it up. This gets around the problem of depending on memories, especially since we can see more than one timeline on which events can differ. Of course, we must choose the right version of the letters! [It is more complex than that, obviously.]

Shanti -

Explicator/Mentor/J.K.

Comment. Yes indeed.

4) Q9/8 Was hat Herr Neihardt um Jahre 1961 getan und geleistet, dass die Wechselwirkung zwischen "sie" und "uns" so reichhaltig und fruchtbar gewe-

sen ist? {What did Neihardt do and achieve around 1961, that the interaction between “them” and “us” has been so rich and fruitful?}

A. We have asked Dr. John F. {sic} Neihardt, and he replied that it was not only not so bad, but not a change for him to treat us as who we are, real people who happen to be dead.

As for 1961, this year marked the start of SORRAT, under his mentorship, and his organized study of physical ψ , toward the end of controlling the ψ movement of physical objects consciously.

However, he had experienced mental ψ phenomena since 1892, and he had conducted experiments with various Omaha and Sioux, not just Black Elk, with his wife, and with both a group in Branson and with Yost and his friends in St. Louis [with Pearl Curran,] during the 1920s. Thus, 1961 marked only another step for him.

Shanti -

Explicator/Rector/J.K.

Comments. Most of these details occur also in the chapters I of Richards (1973) and (1982). The last one concerns Pearl Curran, who was the automa-
tist for “Patience Worth” mentioned above.

Acknowledgement

For such nice hospitality during my visit, I thank the Richards family most warmly, and for much correspondence since, I am grateful to Tom. The other current frequent correspondents have not only returned my sheets with exemplary promptitude but have also shared with me their much longer experience: Alisa Butler, Elly Fithian, Olga Mathews and Bert Schwarz. For comments on the draft I am much indebted to all five friends, and also to Montague Keen. I am grateful to the SPR for accepting my suggestion of a lecture on this topic, and to Eleanor O’Keefe for her assistance in the preparation of the “public” experiment with envelopes 10 and 11. My wife helped with the transcription of the texts.

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