

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Fragments of a Life in Psychical Research: The Case of Charles Richet

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Abstract—In this paper I present a translation of an autobiographical essay French physiologist Charles Richet wrote about his involvement in psychical research in his *Souvenirs d'un Physiologiste* (1933). In the essay Richet presented an outline of aspects of his psychic career, including: Early interest in hypnosis and hypnotic lucidity, encounters with gifted individuals such as Eusapia Palladino and Stephan Ossowiecki, contact with the Society for Psychical Research, his *Traité de Métapsychique* (1922) and his lack of belief in survival of death. Richet's account will be of particular interest for those who are not acquainted with his career. However, the essay is succinct and lacks important events that need to be supplemented with other sources of information. An examination of this autobiographical essay illustrates the limitations of autobiographies to reconstruct the past, but also provides an opportunity to discuss aspects of Richet's psychical research.

Keywords: autobiography—Charles Richet—history of psychical research—French psychical research—Eusapia Palladino—*Traité de Métapsychique*

Introduction

Past autobiographies of researchers in and students of parapsychology have been of particular interest, as seen in those authored by Oliver J. Lodge (1931: Chapters 22–24) and Louisa E. Rhine (1983), as well as recollections compiled more recently (Pilkington 2013).

Following on this interest, I present here a reprint and a translation of an autobiographical account authored by French physiologist Charles Richet, arguably one of the most interesting figures in the history of psychical research. His work in this area has received attention in recent books about French psychic studies, among them the work of Brower (2010), Evrard (2016), Lachapelle (2011), and Plas (2000). Aspects of Richet's psychic work have also been discussed in many other writings (e.g., Alvarado 2008, 2016, Carroy 2015, Edelman 2007, Le Maléfan 2002, Magalhães 2007, Tabori 1972:98–132). One of the purposes of the present article is to present



Figure 1. Charles Richet

information about Richet's interest in psychic phenomena via his own, admittedly brief, account.

It is my impression that most contemporary workers in parapsychology, although aware of Richet's existence, know little about his actual work. Being short, and personal, the excerpt presented below may be of more relevance to workers in parapsychology than the more academic writings cited above. The reprint of the excerpt is also an opportunity to give Richet a voice never heard before in English, since the excerpt in

question originally was published in French.

Furthermore, I hope to use the example of Richet's essay to highlight the problems of autobiographies in the study of parapsychology's past.

Charles Richet

Charles Robert Richet was a well-known physiologist who was born in Paris in 1850, and died there in 1935 (Figure 1). Inheriting both wealth and a high social position in French society from both the maternal and paternal sides, Richet qualified as a physician (1869) and a doctor of sciences (1878), and later became Professor of Physiology at the prestigious Faculté de Médecine of Paris (1887), a position he held until his retirement. The celebration of his retirement in 1926 was a major event that included many scientists and other eminent people (Le Gruyon 1926).

Richet received many honors, among them memberships in the Académie de Médecine (1898) and the Académie des Sciences (1914), the presidency of the Society for Psychical Research (1905), the presidency of the Institut Métapsychique International (Honorary, 1919; President, 1930–1935), and a Legion of Honor Award (1926). But he is better known for his Nobel Prize in 1913 for his work in anaphylaxis (for overviews of Richet's life and work see Osty 1936, van Wijland 2015, and Wolf 1993).

In his study of Richet, Wolf (1993) presents his bibliography of physiological topics, showing many investigations and discussions of

animal heat, gastric juice, muscle excitability, and serum therapy, among other subjects. But Richet was active in many other areas as well. He has been called one of the great thinkers of France (Painlevé 1926) and discussed as a person who “was often at the forefront of modernity in various forms: He was an inventor, explorer, defender of justice, and a man of letters” (Carroy 2004:245).

Richet wrote poetry and plays, many under the name of Ch. Epheyre. But he also wrote about general history, medical bibliography, philosophical issues, psychical research, psychology, social problems, and world peace, and was involved in aviation (Carroy 2004, Wolf 1993). Many specific examples of Richet’s work could be mentioned. An early one dealing with physiology was his book *Physiologie des Muscles et des Nerfs* (Richet 1882), collecting lectures given in courses at the Faculté de Médecine of Paris on such topics as muscle contraction, muscle heat and electricity, irritability and excitability of nerves, and reflex action. Other works include his first paper about anaphylaxis “De l’Action Anaphylactique de Certains Venins” (Portier & Richet 1902), as well as *Le Chaleur Animale* (Richet 1889a), and his editorship of the unfinished *Dictionnaire de Physiologie* (Richet 1895–1928), a prodigious ten-volume reference work about the existing knowledge in physiology and related topics. Work in other areas included his *Essai de Psychologie Générale* (Richet 1887), *Les Guerres et la Paix* (Richet 1899a), *Circé* (a play, Richet & Brunel 1903), *Le Savant* (Richet 1923b), and his *Abrégé d’Histoire Générale* (Richet 1919a).

In the last book, he discussed topics such as the Church, science, and World War I. He said he was guided in his study by two ideas: respect for individuals, and faith in science. “History,” he wrote, “is but a long list of martyrdom. Poor humanity has suffered countless evils . . . Our mind is made up. We are for the martyrs against the executioners, for the oppressed against the oppressors . . .” (Richet 1919a:ii, this and other translations are mine). But other works resonate less with many modern readers, particularly those in which Richet (1919b, 1919c) presented arguments for the inferiority of blacks and the applications of eugenic principles to “improve” the race.

In addition to espousing physiological ideas in psychology (Richet 1887), Richet was known for his pioneering studies in hypnosis (Richet 1875, 1883). He also helped in the professional organization of psychological studies in France, being one of the organizers in 1885 and the General Secretary of the Société de Psychologie Physiologique. Furthermore, he was behind the organization of the Congrès International de Psychologie Physiologique that met in Paris during the Universal Exposition in 1889 and was also a participant in later congresses.

Richet has been considered by many a Renaissance man. A colleague psychical researcher commented that Richet was a well-balanced man and an ideal European (Sudre 1935). He was, in the view of fairly recent writers,

independent, open and tolerant, engaging with courage in science, in thought, and in noble causes even though the positions exposed him to public opinion because he had courage. *He remained always himself . . .*, physician, researcher and humanist, his successes and mistakes indicating his time. (Richet & Estingoy 2003:509)

In recent years there have been several scholarly writings about Richet. Two major efforts have been Wolf's (1993) study and the papers of a conference about him organized by the Académie Nationale de Médecine in November of 2013 (Evrard 2014, van Wijland 2015). In addition, there have been various articles, among them those of Carroy (2004), Estingoy and Ardiet (2005), Richet and Estingoy (2003), and Schneider (2001).

Richet and Psychical Research

By the time Richet started publishing about psychic phenomena, there was a large literature about mesmerism, Spiritualism, and psychic phenomena in general, as seen in Inglis (1992). Among other institutions, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in England in 1882, bringing about many studies about telepathy, apparitions, mediumship, and dissociative phenomena of different sorts (Alvarado 2002, Gauld 1968). This period produced much empirical work such as thought-transference experiments (Guthrie & Birchall 1884), and analyses of cases (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886). In addition there were many important observations and ideas during the late Nineteenth Century of non-conscious currents of thought coming from observations of hysteria, hypnosis, secondary personalities, and mediumship, some of which were summarized in a review article as the "unconscious activity of the mind" (Héricourt 1889). These developments have received much study by various historians (e.g., Crabtree 1993, Gauld 1992), developments of which psychical research was an integral part (see also Alvarado 2002, Plas 2000).

Richet was part of this movement, particularly strong in France, that explored the existence and range of non-conscious human functioning and that included both conventional and unconventional phenomena (Plas 2000). This is seen in his writings about personality changes in hypnosis, unconscious movements, and the induction of trance at a distance (Richet 1883, 1886a, 1886b).

An important early contribution, and a classic of Nineteenth-Century

ESP literature, was Richet's article about mental suggestion, or the "influence that an individual's thought exerts over a specific sense, without an appreciable exterior phenomenon on our senses, over the thought of a nearby individual" (Richet 1884b:615). This included transmission of thoughts and images, as well as other effects such as the induction of trance at a distance. In the paper, Richet described his use of statistical analyses in several guessing tasks with various targets, as well as discussions of conceptual ideas such as the unconscious nature of the process (see also Alvarado 2008).



Figure 2. Bien Boa

In later papers Richet continued testing various gifted individuals (Richet 1888, 1889b), something that continued into the Twentieth Century and included observations of Polish psychic Stephan Ossowiecki (1877–1944) (Richet no date c circa 1928).

There were also many experiences with various mediums and psychics. Examples were séances with Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918, Richet 1893a) and Leonora E. Piper (1857–1950, Leaf 1890:618–620). Richet's (1905a) materialization séances with medium Marthe Béraud are well-known, an episode that generated many controversies (Le Maléfan 2002). Here both full and partial materializations were observed, a frequent one was Bien Boa, covered in a white cloak, with both a helmet and a beard.

The best known of his works was the highly influential *Traité de Métapsychique* (Richet 1922), where instead of psychical research he used the term "métapsychique" (metapsychics), a word he had suggested before (Richet 1905c). In the *Traité*, and elsewhere, Richet frequently expressed hope that future developments in science would allow us to understand psychic phenomena. His popularization and discussion of psychical research not only continued in other books (e.g., Richet no date a circa 1931, no date c circa 1928), but also in articles in non-psychic journals (e.g., Richet 1923a) and in newspapers (e.g., Richet 1921). In addition to the above-mentioned examples, Richet's articles in psychic journals included topics such as statistical analyses of ESP tests (Richet 1893b), recurrent doubts in the study of psychic phenomena (Richet 1899b), the decimal indexing of

psychic literature (Richet 1905b), xenoglossy (Richet 1905e), an ancient case of near-death experience (Richet 1909), premonitions (Richet 1920), and survival of death (Richet 1924a).

Richet did much to support psychical research in various forums of conventional science. He opened the door to, and defended the importance of, psychical research in the international congresses of psychology (Alvarado 2011b). At the International Congress of Physiologists, held at Edinburgh in 1923, Richet discussed the possibility that “there may be a knowledge of reality obtained by other means than the ordinary channels of the senses” (Richet 1923a:493). Similarly, Richet (1925) discussed the topic in one of the lectures on the occasion of his retirement that he presented in 1925 at the Faculté de Médecine of Paris.

He was also one of the founders of a very important French journal, the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*, first published in 1891, where not only French but also authors from other countries discussed psychic phenomena (Alvarado & Evrard 2012). Furthermore, Richet was a supporter of the Institut Métapsychique International since its beginnings. Interestingly, Richet recognized the inability of science to explain psychic phenomena beyond some general speculations (e.g., Richet 1905c, 1922). In addition, and reflecting his training in physiology, he referred to mental psychic phenomena as “a new chapter in physiology” (Richet 1923a:496).

Many of the phenomena of metapsychics, Richet affirmed more than once, were real. He stated in his *Traité*:

1. there is in us a faculty of knowledge that is absolutely different from our common sensory faculties of knowledge (cryptesthesia);
2. movement of objects without contact are produced, even in plain light (telekinesis);
3. there are hands, bodies, objects, that appear to be formed completely from a cloud and show all the appearances of life (ectoplasmy);
4. there are presentiments that neither perspicacity nor chance can explain, and sometimes they are verified to their smallest details. (Richet 1922:761)

He admitted there were difficulties in the study of the phenomena, but was hopeful about the future.

However, Richet was convinced that metapsychics would “not overthrow the laws that science has established,” only that they would introduce new facts (Richet no date b circa 1933:246). The new facts “may be unforeseen, but they will never be contradictory” (Richet 1905d:xvii). Instead the field would bring new ideas and facts that “despite their enormous unlikelihood, do not absolutely contradict any of the classic phenomena of physics and physiology” (Richet no date a circa 1931:30).

While Richet was praised by many psychical researchers (e.g., Sudre 1935, Osty 1936), he was criticized by others, and particularly by individuals who were outside psychical research (e.g., Anonymous 1888, Janet 1923). A commentator stated that Richet seemed to show a contradiction between his persona as a savant and his credulity regarding metapsychics, but that we should remember that high intelligence could go hand in hand with credulity (de Fleury 1922). The critic saw Richet as one of those highly capable and intelligent men who nonetheless showed much credulity and who had problems distinguishing good from bad ideas, or, because of their good nature, could not accept the bad faith of others intent on deception.

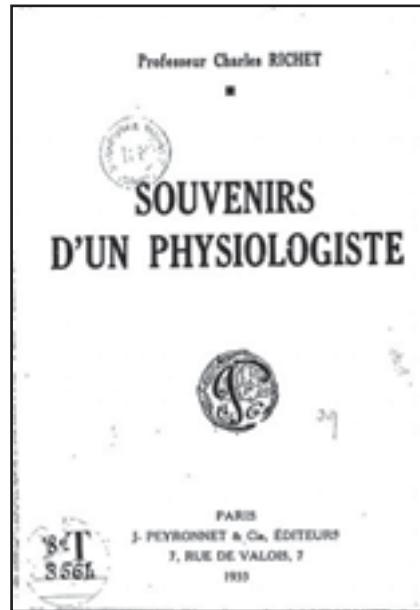


Figure 3. Title Page of Richet's *Souvenirs d'un Physiologiste* [1933]

Richet's Autobiographical Comments

Souvenirs d'un Physiologiste

The essay reprinted here was taken from Richet's *Souvenirs d'un Physiologiste* (1933), an autobiographical account of various aspects of his career, but with little information about his family (Figure 3). The book was described by a reviewer as the product of a "long and passionate experience of life" (Pierret 1935).

He stated in the first chapter that it was pleasurable for him to recollect "the persons as well as the uncertainties, the obstacles, the satisfactions and disappointments that have crossed my path" (Richet 1933:7). Richet also expressed hope that his recollections could show young people the ways by which a physiologist could establish new facts.

The book has 20 chapters full of interesting anecdotes of Richet's early, middle, and later life, anecdotes touching on many personalities and incidents, and on research and publications that illustrate his interests in

many topics. An example of one of them is Richet's statement that during a cruise he read his play *Circé* to Albert I, Prince of Monaco (1848–1922), who had it presented in Monte Carlo. The lead role went to the famous Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), whom Richet knew. Some other topics discussed by Richet were his initial research on anaphylaxis with Paul Portier (1866–1962), his work with serotherapy, his passion for medical and physiological bibliography, female workers in his laboratory, his editorship of the *Revue Scientifique*, his *Dictionnaire de Physiologie*, his anti-war activities, and his interest in airplanes and their development.

In addition, Richet commented on the scientific enterprise. In one chapter he argued that science does not advance if it is not audacious. He wrote: "We must construct the most incredible, the most reckless hypotheses, even if they contradict the most classic universally accepted facts" (p. 128).

Psychic phenomena were commented on in the last chapter (pp. 147–156). A translation of this section follows.

Richet's Essay

A close relationship perhaps may be found between the occultist psycho-physiology I have cultivated with zeal and the normal psycho-physiology that I have taught with no less zeal. Because I give here my recollections as a physiologist, I am forced to speak a little about the so-called occult sciences, nearly taboo, which have taken a large part of my time, which I have at heart, and which inspire my old soul with a great hope.¹

My interest had quite a singular beginning. Being very young then, a student of philosophy at the Lycée Condorcet, I had the opportunity to attend a session of somnambulism and hypnotism given by a magnetizer named Cannelle who put his very pretty wife to sleep and demonstrated that she had become insensitive.

I was very struck by this experience and one day I put one of the friends of my sister to sleep. (I was but sixteen years old.) After a few passes she closed her eyes, and was unable to open them. My sister and I were extremely upset, thinking that we would be scolded by our parents. We did not talk then, but I promised to myself to resume, when the opportunity arose, this experience which had amazed me.

Three years later . . . I magnetized a few patients. At the time I had a very distinct power for hypnotizing but after nearly fifty years I have, it seems, lost all that power.²

Here is a memory that is also present in my mind as if the thing had happened yesterday (although it would seem it is from sixty years ago). There was, in a room, quite a young girl, of 16 years of age, barely sick, whom I put to sleep easily. I tried to have one of my friends witness this, a young American, a medical student like me. He had never [before] come to the Hôtel-Dieu.³ I put little Adrienne to sleep and once she was asleep I wanted to examine whether she would show some phenomena of lucidity. So I asked her to tell me the name of the friend who was with me, which made her laugh because she did not know him at all.—"Look," I told her, "read his name." I did not write the name, of course, I limited myself to thinking about it, and she said "H. E. and then a letter I do not see, then R. and N." My friend was called Hearn.

Alas! Alas! I refused to admit the reality of this admirable experience. She had to convince me that lucidity exists. But I took no account of it. It is rather sad that we do not see except that which we are accustomed to see and that we want to see.

My 1872 blindness gives me a great understanding for those who, today, despite clear evidence of lucidity that we have presented, continue to deny it stubbornly.

I doubted lucidity, I had no doubt of anything from hypnotism, and I would have continued my research at the Hôtel-Dieu if my teacher and friend Henri Liouville,⁴ who was then head of the clinic at Behier, had not formally prohibited it. I protested strongly, but in vain. So I had to wait for more favorable conditions.

They were not long in coming. I entered the service as an intern of Professor Léon Le Fort⁵ at the Beaujon Hospital. There I was almost my own teacher, in the service of women who were mildly ill patients, and then, for six months, in follow-up visits every night, I put one or two patients to sleep, sometimes more. Hypnotic sleep was easily achieved, but I was not concerned about lucidity and occultism, a phenomena I did not *want* to believe, as I was trying only to obtain an hypnotic state. The rooms of the Beaujon Hospital had become like a court of miracles. I could do many experiments that showed me the absolute reality of induced somnambulism.

I wished then to publish these facts that seemed to me to be new and remarkable. At that time, in 1875, we looked with scorn and indignation on all that was written about somnambulism. In his great encyclopedic dictionary of the medical sciences, Dechambre presented a paper about somnambulism and it ended with these words printed in large letters, the largest in the whole book: "*ultimately animal magnetism does not exist.*"⁶

In my paper, I demonstrated that it does exist.

When I spoke of my project to my father, he told me these simple words; "*You therefore want to waste yourself?—Is it that one is wasted telling the truth?—You are right,*" he responded after a long silence, "*do as you will.*"

Very liberally Professor Charles Robin accepted the publication of my paper in his journal.⁷ A few months after, a paper by the great physiologist Heidenhain confirmed what I had said. And then the experiences of Charcot, partially inspired by me (then an intern at the Salpêtrière), and especially by Ruault, . . . [in training with] Charcot, and a powerful hypnotist.⁸

So at the same time I was pursuing my physiological chemistry experiments, I studied somnambulism.⁹ I had some rather remarkable subjects, and then I made experiments (which had some impact) on personality changes, phenomena which I called—although the name is a little barbaric—the objectification of types. Somnambulists, when asleep, forget everything becoming the character they are induced to be and this change is so deep that we are always amazed. I said to Alice, "*you are an old woman. Tell me what you feel? . . .*" "*What!—speak louder, I am hard of hearing.*" Sometimes the change is to something that is funny. Having hypnotized my dear friend Henry Ferrari, and having changed him into a parrot, I noticed that he was a little uneasy; "*Did I eat,*" he asked, "*the grain that is in my cage?*" These experiences are recounted with details in a long paper which Th. Ribot published in his *Revue Philosophique*.¹⁰

I was conducting my research, when I received a visit from a prominent Russian psychologist, Aksakoff, who reproached me for not knowing the facts of spiritualism, facts made much more interesting, according to him, than all of somnambulism. "*To*



Figure 4. Séance with Palladino in Milan 1892. Controlling the medium (sitting Lombroso left and Richet right). Published in Richet (1893:7).

see one of these facts," I said, "I would go to the end of the world." He only smiled. But some time later he wrote to me: "it is not about going to the end of the world, but only to Milan."¹¹

I went to Milan.

There I saw a quite extraordinary woman, Eusapia Paladino. I cannot speak about her without a real recognition of her importance to me, as it is mainly to her that I owe becoming so interested in the occult sciences.

In Milan, with Lombroso, Schiaparelli, Gerosa, and mainly Finzi, I saw some remarkable things which did not bring me absolute conviction, but which made me lean strongly toward acceptance of occult facts (see Figure 4).¹²

I decided to continue to seek new experiences with Eusapia and since that time, that is after almost forty-five years, I have conducted an uninterrupted series of studies on occultism.¹³

First, I had the chance to experiment on one of my charming and loyal friends, Gaston Fournier, who was a remarkable medium.

The decisive experiment I did with him was the following. A table was prepared so that movements were indicated by an electric bell. The alphabet, placed at the end of the room, was in semi-darkness. Gaston had his back turned. He put his hands on the table and made it move, in accordance with the letters over which we silently passed a pencil. We then got precise answers that had no great interest by themselves, except to show Gaston's lucidity because he could not see the letters of the alphabet. I called this the *hidden alphabet*.¹⁴

At that time a psychic society was founded in England which soon became, thanks to the eminent persons who founded it, the most important psychological society in the world. I came into close relations with the founding scholars of the new society: Gurney, Myers, Sedgwick [sic], Oliver Lodge. It was also at this time that their admirable book was published, *Phantasms of the Living*, which is like the breviary of serious occultism.¹⁵

Eusapia exhibited some very curious phenomena. But that did not satisfy me. I decided to begin again. So I had her come to a tiny Mediterranean island that I owned, on which I was the only inhabitant.

Aided by my learned friend Julien Ochorowicz, I devoted three months to experimenting with Eusapia.¹⁶ Every two days we spent several hours (overnight) studying the strange phenomena that Eusapia presented.

This woman, great and prodigious, was also scrutinized elsewhere in the most penetrating way by leading scholars, the most learned Italian physiologists, by Bottazzi, Foa, Herlitzka, Feeding [sic], Myers, Schrenck-Notzing, Albert de Rochas, Flammarion, d'Arnsval, Curie, Mme. Curie, Courtier, etc., etc.¹⁷

I do not believe that any medium has ever been subjected to such severe surveillance, which was also repeated. However, she was accused of fraud, and Myers was tempted to believe in fraud. While at home one day in Paris, after a brilliant experience, I said to Myers: "This time are you sure of the reality of the phenomena, you will never look back on this belief?" And he swore it to me.¹⁸

I had close ties with Fr. Myers for whom I professed as much affection as admiration. We made many psychological trips to see renowned mediums in Zwickau (Saxony), in Rome, in Kalmar, Sweden, but I cannot relate them here . . .¹⁹

It has often been said that I was deceived and an ineradicable legend of the mystification that I was subjected to in Algiers was formed.²⁰

Here is exactly what happened: at General Noël's, commander of the artillery of Algiers, there were wonderful séances that took place in a small locked room. A red light lit up the room and allowed all of us to see well. We were six people. The room was not very big, rather it was a square of about 5 meters wide. Therefore it was physically impossible for someone to come in without being seen by any of us.

However, the general had a coach driver who boldly stole the general's horses' oats in order to resell them. The general dismissed him. The thief A . . . wanted revenge, and he claimed that he had played the phantom. Unfortunately he found reporters, a medical doctor, and a theater director, who believed the words of this scoundrel. A . . . appeared on stage waving a cloth, as in the *Cloches de Corneville* [a French operetta]. That is all. Will I be believed when I say that this is not serious?

I wanted to give a name to this new science. As I had been chosen for president of the *Society for Psychical Research*, in the presidential address that I presented in 1885 [sic] I named it metapsychic science, without knowing that elsewhere some months before, in a small Polish pamphlet, the Polish psychologist Mr. Lutołowski had proposed the same term.²¹

The word metapsychic has had a rapid acceptance, which I find extraordinary, and it is commonly used and understood.²²

I wrote a big book I called *Traité de Métapsychique*.²³ This book has been translated into English, Spanish, and German. I analyzed and discussed the occult sciences according to the strict discipline of classical science. I give here my main conclusions.

1. There is a mental metapsychics, that is to say, the phenomena of lucidity, premonition, monition, and telepathy. Human intelligence can know realities that are unknown to the senses.

2. There are phenomena of telekinesis, that is to say movement of objects at a distance. In other words, there is a mechanical metapsychics. It is as if, at times, some forms may come out from the organism (forms I have called ectoplasm²⁴); and this ectoplasm can be the basis of phantoms.

This beautiful new science—even though it is still embryonic and so can barely be called a science—is the science of the unusual. It starts with the unshakable experiments of William Crookes;²⁵ it continues with the research of Flammarion, Myers, Schrenck-Notzing, of Ochorowicz, and with that of my famous and dear friend Sir Oliver Lodge. I cannot state here all my admiration for these brave, shrewd,



Figure 5. Stephan Ossowiecki

prudent men, who have not hesitated to compromise by maintaining unpopular views, facing the dismissive sarcasm of an ignorant and malicious public. Alas! Almost all have preceded me in the great journey toward what they believed to be survival. My friend Sir Oliver Lodge happily bravely continues his apostolate in spiritualism.

I have known many mediums. With some I have experimented only once or twice, with Eglinton, with

Slade, with Mrs. Piper,²⁶ but, as interesting as the observations I made about these great mediums are, I do not have to talk about them here, because I maintain that an opinion cannot be formed from two or three seances.

I have experimented often with Stephan Ossovietzki [sic].²⁷

If Eusapia is the type of medium who produces physical effects, Stephan is the type of medium who produces mental metapsychics. *His lucidity is dazzling.* I challenge a man of good faith who experiments with Stephan not to be convinced that the intellect can know about realities that the senses have not perceived.

It is quite interesting to note that Stephan has no telekinesis effects and on the other hand Eusapia has no phenomena of lucidity.²⁸

I have often been accused of being a spiritist, that is to say of believing that deceased individuals can communicate their thoughts and memories to mediums, and sometimes reappear and revive, preserving all the materiality of their old earthly life. In truth, I cannot accept the reality of those reports, but I must admit that some strange phenomena do happen that are absolutely inexplicable by the meager data of current science.²⁹ It is therefore appropriate to go beyond and look for the laws of the unusual, because *the unusual exists*. Metapsychics is still in a beginning stage, but I am convinced that it is the science of the future.

A very generous man, Mr. Jean Meyer, founded an international metapsychic institute where remarkable work has been done in this semi-infernal domain by Geley, Osty, Warcollier, J.-C. Roux, and by some men without prejudice who believe in the superior virtue of science.³⁰

In my old age I return to my starting point. While young I worshiped the science of life and in my final days I worship this science again. But I understand this in a broader way than when I started. The science of life merges with the science of thought, and I foresee a future of magnificent horizons.³¹

I may be wrong, but the honor of being able to conduct such research gives some value to life.³²

Concluding Remarks

In his essay Richet reminds us of many important aspects of his career related to psychical research. Among them are his early hypnosis work, his work with the “hidden alphabet,” studies of Palladino, contact with SPR workers, and his *Traité de Métapsychique*. It is clear that the amount of work invested by Richet showed a deep interest in the topic. He in fact said in the essay that he believed metapsychics was “the science of the future.”

While Richet’s outline of his psychical research career is useful, the account is very brief, barely consisting of mentions of topics and incidents with little or no description. While we cannot expect to have a very detailed account in a chapter, my impression is that Richet presents more details in the book about other topics than about metapsychics. Unfortunately this succinctness produces an account with important omissions. For example, Richet does not mention his early—now classic—use of statistics to evaluate what we would refer today as ESP (Richet 1884b), nor his writings about chance and the calculation of probability in later years (e.g., Richet 1888:25–30, 1893b, 1922:63–68).

The same can be said of his Nineteenth-Century ESP work with various individuals (Richet 1888, 1889b), among them Léonie Leboulanger (born 1837). In addition to conducting his own tests, Richet was present when Pierre Janet (1886:217) conducted some of his famous tests of induction of trance at a distance with Leboulanger, but he also omitted this information from his essay. Anyone unfamiliar with Richet’s publications would not be able to tell that he was a leader of French studies of mental suggestion in general, something that is clear in contemporary (Ochorowicz 1887) and later accounts (Plas 2000).

In addition, this account omits various other things. This includes the importance Richet gave to specific phenomena he observed with various gifted individuals—Stella, Alice, and Palladino (Richet 1922:759), and accounts of various spontaneous ESP experiences that were related to him in various ways. The latter includes two veridical experiences related to the death of his maternal grandfather in 1878 (Richet 1888:162–163) and his mother in 1884 (Richet 1922:457–458).

Such omissions—as well as those regarding speculations about the “sixth sense” in terms of unknown vibrations (Richet no date c circa 1928), involvement in the early psychology congresses, and in the founding of the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques* (Alvarado 2011b, Alvarado & Evrard 2012)—show the limitations of the essay to provide us with a good view of Richet activities regarding psychic phenomena.

While no autobiography can be complete, the succinctness of essays such as this one cautions us about the use of autobiographical documents as single sources of information to trace someone's life work. Like all human accounts, they are based on personal perspectives about what was important or not, something that may distort the record. Autobiographies, like history in general, are reconstructions of the past, but reconstructions based on one person's perspective and motivations, on their priorities at the moment of ordering the recollections of a lifetime.

The latter is particularly an issue when recollecting controversies. Richet's account of the accusations of fraud surrounding the materialization séances he had in Algiers (Richet 1905a; see Note 20) is incomplete. The issue was not *only* that Areski said he faked the phenomena, as Richet simply stated in the essay. There were other issues that went unmentioned, such as the supposed confession of the medium, and the existence of a trap door (for overviews and references, see Brower 2010:84–92, Evrard 2016:172–199, and Le Maléfan 2002). Regardless of the validity of the critiques, and Richet dealt with them at the time, a modern reader unfamiliar with the situation will find that Richet was very selective in his account of the events.

Such selectivity extends to Richet's gloss of critiques about his best-known work, the *Traité de Métapsychique*. Readers of Richet's autobiographical essay will not realize the differences of opinion that the book elicited. Some of these critiques were negative, not only putting in doubt Richet's conclusions, but casting doubts over metapsychics as a discipline (Janet 1923, Pieron 1922). At the other extreme were the critiques of others, among them Gustave Geley (1922) and Oliver Lodge (1923), who accepted metapsychic phenomena, but took issue with Richet's materialistic ideology, including his doubts about the possibility of discarnate action.

Furthermore, there is the problem of correct recollection of facts, since the whole account is based on memory. A few statements in the essay illustrate the problems with memory reconstruction. For one, there is the mistake of saying that the SPR Presidential Address was presented in 1885, when this took place in 1905 (Richet 1905c), although this could have been a typographical mistake. More important is the lack of perspective when Richet stated in the essay about Palladino that "it is mainly to her that I owe being so interested in the occult sciences." While there is no question that the séances with the medium had a great impact on him, we cannot forget that by the time that Richet had his first séances in 1892 he had already shown much interest in psychic phenomena, particularly what we refer today as ESP (Richet 1884b, 1886a, 1888, 1889b).

This problem with perspective is also evident with the lack of a chronological sequence of events mentioned in the essay. The reader is

not informed about the year, or time period, when Palladino, Piper, and Ossowiecki are mentioned. The same can be said of Richet's *Traité*. Not all readers will know that this was published in 1922.³³

My intention has not been to criticize Richet. Instead, I believe that all these problems, typical of the writings of others than Richet's, alert us to the limitations of autobiographical documents when they are used to understand lives and the history of a field, something that extends to the autobiographies of mediums and psychics (Alvarado 2011a). Nonetheless, when used together with other sources of information they are not only informative, but illuminating of a time period.

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Notes

- ¹ Richet stated before that there are occult phenomena but in the sense of being unknown (Richet 1891:2). In other publications he rejected the term occultism (Richet 1907:423, 1922:2).
- ² Probably refers to French physician Louis Jules Béhier (1813–1876). Regarding his ability to hypnotize, Richet (1922:121) wrote years earlier that he used to induce trance with ease in the old days but that at present it was the opposite. He also pointed out that he had heard the same from other hypnotizers.
- ³ One of the oldest hospitals in Paris.
- ⁴ French physician Henri Liouville (1837–1887), who taught at the Faculté de Médecine, Paris.
- ⁵ This probably is French surgeon Léon Clément Le Fort (1829–1893). See Richet's (1886a) report of the tests with the woman, a patient of about 25 years of age.
- ⁶ This was French physician Amédée Dechambre (1812–1886). In his article he concluded that because the effects in question were produced by "a cause other than a special agent called magnetism, we conclude with this radical conclusion: ANIMAL MAGNETISM DOES NOT EXIST" (Dechambre 1873:207). What Dechambre opposed was the explanation of phenomena via the concept of the force referred to as animal magnetism. He believed that an overexcited imagination, affected as well by the social contagion involved in rituals, could have "repercussions on the nervous

system, and . . . on organic actions,” enhancing or diminishing sensibility, and “exerting a real action on the course of disease” (Dechambre 1873:206). As for Richet, he did not say what he believed, but we know from his writings (e.g., Richet 1884a) that he did not believe in a magnetic force. I have not found evidence that he interpreted his difficulties in using hypnosis in later years as evidence for the existence of such a force. In later years Richet (1922:121–122) expressed doubts about magnetism, pointing out the difficulty in controlling for suggestion.

- ⁷ Richet’s first sentence in the paper was: “It takes some courage to utter aloud the word somnambulism” (Richet 1875:348). This paper has been considered very important in the history of French hypnosis (e.g., Estingoy & Ardiet 2005). Charles-Philippe Robin (1821–1885) held at one point a chair of histology at the Faculty of Medicine of Paris. The article in question was published in the *Journal de l’Anatomie et de la Physiologie Normales et Pathologiques de l’Homme et des Animaux* edited by Robin. On Richet and hypnosis, see Estingoy and Ardiet (2005) and Gauld (1992:298–302).
- ⁸ This is a reference to German physiologist Rudolf Heidenhain (1834–1897). Richet refers to Jean-Martin Charcot’s (1825–1893) famous and highly influential hypnosis work (e.g., Charcot 1882), which founded a theoretical approach to hypnosis that caused many controversies (see Nicolas 2004). Physician Albert Ruault (1850–1928) later became known as a skeptic of the phenomena of mental suggestion (Ruault 1886).
- ⁹ For a bibliography of Richet’s early physiological work, see Richet (1894; see also Wolf 1993).
- ¹⁰ See Richet (1883). Théodule Ribot (1839–1916) was a French philosopher who had much influence on the rise of empirical psychology in Nineteenth-Century France. He edited the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, an important French forum for articles about philosophy, psychology, and various social sciences, and one which was unusually open during the Nineteenth Century to discussions of psychic phenomena (Alvarado & Evrard 2013, Nicolas & Murray 1999).
- ¹¹ Once a Councilor to the Czar, Russian Alexander Aksakof (1832–1903), whose name has various spellings in the literature, did much work in psychical research. He is not generally considered to be a psychologist. Perhaps Richet referred to him as a psychologist due to his interest in phenomena such as mediumship.
- ¹² Palladino not only influenced Richet’s beliefs, but those of many other individuals as well, not to mention the development of research techniques and theoretical concepts (Alvarado 1993). Early overviews of her mediumship were presented by Carrington (1909) and by de Rochas

(1896:1–315). Aksakof was one of the organizers of the famous 1892 séances with this medium (Aksakof et al. 1893, Richet 1893a), which brought her mediumship to international attention. The names Richet mentioned were Italian scientists who attended some or most of the séances: criminologist and psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (1836–1909), astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli (1835–1910), physicist Giuseppe Gerosa (1857–1910), and physicist Giorgio Finzi (1868–1958). In addition to Aksakof, others attended as well but were not mentioned by Richet: Italian philosopher Angelo Brofferio (1846–1894), German philosopher Carl du Prel (1839–1899), and Italian physicist Giovanni Battista Ermacora (1858–1898).

¹³ On these séances, see Lodge (1894) and Richet (1895). It may be that after the Palladino seances Richet became more involved with psychic phenomena, but readers should be aware that before these sittings he had shown considerable interest in psychic phenomena (Richet 1884b, 1888, 1889b).

¹⁴ This was reported by Richet (1884b:651–653, see also Richet no date circa 1928:87–89). A clearer description of this test was presented by Richet elsewhere:

G., the medium, placed his hands on the table, every tilt setting in motion an electric bell. C. and D. also had their hands on the table but did not influence it. At three or four yards' distance on another table, and behind; on a sheet of cardboard, the alphabet was placed so that G., who had his back turned to it, could not see it. A. and B. sit at this table runs over the alphabet with a pencil, B. writes down the letter at which the table tilts, he being made aware of this by the sound of the bell. The letters indicated by this method give intelligible sentences; therefore, the tilts being due to unconscious muscular pressure by G., these pressures, indicating the letter required, must be due to lucidity. Everything happens as if G., wanting to send a message, could see the alphabet to which his back is turned and which is hidden by the cardboard sheet. The movement of the pencil over the letters is both silent and irregular, and during these experiments we intentionally talk, sing, recite verses, and in fact make such a noise that B., who writes down the letters, can hardly hear the stroke of the bell. (Richet 1923c:168–169)

¹⁵ Richet here refers to the SPR, founded in London in 1882 (Gauld 1968). The persons mentioned are among the most important early members of the Society: intellectual Edmund Gurney (1847–1888), classical scholar Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901), moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), and physicist Oliver J. Lodge (1851–1940). The first major work of the SPR was *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, &

Podmore 1886), an examination of possible cases of telepathy, presenting hundreds of cases of veridical manifestations.

- ¹⁶ Ochorowicz (1850–1917) was a Polish psychologist and philosopher, as well as a psychological researcher. On his séances with Richet, see Lodge (1894) and Richet (1895).
- ¹⁷ This is a reference to Italian physiologist Filippo Bottazzi (1867–1941), Italian pathologist Pio Foà (1848–1923), Italian physiologist Amedeo Herlitzka (1872–1949), English barrister Everard Feilding (1867–1936), the above-mentioned Frederic W. H. Myers, German physician Albert Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929), French military engineer Albert de Rochas (1837–1914), French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842–1925), French physiologist Jacques-Arsène d’Arnsval (1851–1940), French physicists Pierre Curie (1859–1906) and Marie Curie (1867–1934), and French psychologist Jules Courtier (1860–1938).
- ¹⁸ In a paper published by the SPR, Richet said that after his initial Milan séances he was convinced of the reality of the phenomena but that about a fortnight after the events he had doubts (Richet 1899b:156).
- ¹⁹ Richet (1901) expressed his admiration for Myers in an obituary. He believed Myers’ work “perhaps will eclipse all other human knowledge” (p. 178).
- ²⁰ This sentence, and the next two paragraphs were in a footnote of which the call number appeared at the end of the previous paragraph in this paper (ending with footnote 19). Here Richet referred to his materialization séances with Marthe Béraud (Richet 1905a), which brought much skepticism and many controversies at the time, too extensive to review here (for summaries and references, see Brower 2010:84–92, Evrard 2016:172–199, and Le Maléfan 2002). The séances took place in Algiers at the villa of General Elie Noël (1835–1915) and his wife Carmencita (1846–1907). The A. referred to in the account is the coachman Areski. Richet’s account in *Souvenirs* presented here in translation does not include many other details and accusations, including his contemporary counter-critiques, which I have avoided discussing here (see Evrard 2016:172–199). Regardless of the interpretation of the incident, these accusations, and the séances in general, caused much skepticism and affected Richet’s reputation, something that is not evident in Richet’s short comment. He defended the validity of his observations in several publications (e.g., Richet 1922:599, 642–650, 1925:861).
- ²¹ The address, entitled “La Métapsychique,” was presented in 1905, not in 1885, and published in the SPR *Proceedings* (Richet 1905b). In a footnote in the address (p. 13) Richet acknowledged the prior use of the term by Polish philosopher Wincenty Lutosławski (1863–1954).

- ²² The term was used mainly in France, and to some extent in a few other (mainly European) countries, but it was not widely used in English.
- ²³ On this book (Richet 1922), translated into English from its second French edition (Richet 1923b), see Alvarado (2010).
- ²⁴ The actual first appearance of the term ectoplasm is uncertain, even though Richet has been credited with it repeatedly and Richet (1922:656) himself claimed he invented it in relationship to his observations with Palladino (see Granger 2014). He wrote about early séances he had with this medium (see Lodge 1894, Richet 1895): “In séances with Lodge, Myers, Ochorowicz, every time we were touched, we said, half jokingly, ‘an ectoplasm again!’” (Richet 1922:637, footnote).
- ²⁵ As is well-known, Crookes (1832–1919) was an English chemist and physicist interested in the phenomena of Spiritualism, particularly the physical ones. Richet (1905c:7) admired Crookes’ scientific courage in discussing controversial topics, and believed that Crookes’ studies were of fundamental importance for physical mediumship (Richet 1922:35).
- ²⁶ This refers to English medium William Eglinton (1857–1933), and American mediums Henry Slade (1835–1905) and Leonora E. Piper (1857–1950).
- ²⁷ Ossowiecki was a famous Polish psychic. Richet (no date c circa 1928:148–162) gave a summary of his experiences with this psychic.
- ²⁸ Actually, some mental phenomena have been discussed with Palladino (Venzano 1906). Similarly there were rare physical phenomena with Ossowiecki (Barrington, Stevenson, & Weaver 2005:23).
- ²⁹ Richet (e.g., 1922, 1924b) wrote repeatedly about his views about survival. For example, he argued that cryptesthesia from the mind of a medium “is much simpler than survival, because survival supposes incredible amounts of facts, unheard of, which collide in front of all accepted physiological truths which are contrary also to logic, and which warns us that what is born must die” (Richet 1922:261). Commenting about discarnate and human agency explanations of phenomena, Richet stated near the end of his life that “we face monstrous improbabilities; we swim in the inhabitual, the miraculous, the prodigious” (Richet no date b circa 1933:289). His views on the topic are summarized by Alvarado (2016). I am grateful to Renaud Evrard for pointing out to me that Carroy (2015) has argued that Richet was more positive about spiritist interpretations in his literary fiction works dealing with psychic phenomena (on the latter see also Carroy 2004).
- ³⁰ Meyer (1855–1931) was a French industrialist and spiritist who funded the Institut Métapsychique International (1919). The other men, all involved with psychical research in France, were physician Gustave Geley (1868–

1924), physician Eugène Osty (1874–1938), chemical engineer René Warcollier (1881–1962), and physician Jean-Charles Roux (1872–1942).

³¹ This paragraph and the next sentence are separated from the text and may have been meant as a short conclusion to the book, and not as a commentary about metapsychics.

³² At the end of his *Traité*, Richet stated that regardless of difficulties in understanding psychic phenomena there “is no reason for not increasing our efforts and labors. . . . The task is so beautiful that, even if we fail, the honor of having undertaken it gives some value to life” (Richet 1922:793).

³³ Renaud Evrard suggested to me that it would be interesting to compare the chapter presented here with Richet’s previously written but unpublished *Mémoires sur Moi et sur les Autres*, held at the Fonds Richet of the Académie National de Médecine (<http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/anm.aspx#details?id=FileId-363>), which I have not seen. In fact Evrard, who has done much research about Richet (Evrard 2016:Chapter 5), suggested the possibility that Richet used the *Mémoires* to write *Souvenirs*.

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