

Antonia (Case Study Analysis)

Reincarnation researchers agree on the need for caution when evaluating past life claims based on hypnotic regression. However, a few such cases are especially rich in accurate historical detail that cannot easily be explained in terms of cryptomnesia or living-agent psi, and which may therefore plausibly be considered evidence of survival and rebirth. In this analysis article, Stephen Braude considers the case of memories relating to the life of sixteenth century Spanish woman.



General Concerns about Hypnotic Regression

It is well-known that hypnosis provides no guaranteed or reliable access to the truth. Many ‘past life’ accounts elicited in this way have been traced to published fiction. Hypnotized subjects may creatively embellish material which they have forgotten and which hypnosis helps recover, and it may take considerable research to demonstrate that nothing paranormal was going on.^[1]

Moreover, as a large body of research has documented in detail, it is clear that hypnosis often liberates a person’s latent creativity and imagination.^[2] For example, under the influence of stage hypnotists, good hypnotic subjects do things they have never done before, such as dance the tango, accurately imitate their boss or farm animals, behave in an overtly seductive manner, and more generally display dramatic and creative abilities they might otherwise be too inhibited to express.^[3] In fact, it has been known at least since the time of Mesmer that hypnosis in particular and dissociation generally are psi-conducive states.^[4] A substantial body of evidence indicates that ostensibly regressed subjects do not, in fact, regress, but instead draw on presumably latent creative capacities in order to simulate regression.^[5]

Nevertheless, we should also not be blindly skeptical about hypnotic regressions. As the following remarkable case of ostensible reincarnation illustrates, hypnosis may lead to behavior and displays of propositional knowledge that apparently cannot be explained away in terms of latent capacities. Some sort of psi hypothesis seems mandatory, even if it is posited *in addition to* an appeal to latent creativity—or in other words, some combination of latent creativity and either survival-psi or living-agent psi. The ‘Antonia’ case is exceptionally rich in intriguing detail, and cannot be assessed without considering those details carefully.

Laurel Dilmen/ Linda Tarazi

The subject’s name is Laurel Dilmen, and her reported former life was investigated by psychotherapist Linda Tarazi.^[6] Laurel was born and raised in the Chicago area during the Depression, and she lived in that general vicinity all her life. After attending public schools, she graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in education. Her ancestry is German and her religious background is Lutheran, although at the age of twenty she became a Methodist. Laurel embarked on her teaching career after a few years in show business, and at the time of Tarazi’s report she was married with two children.

In the mid-1970s Laurel investigated hypnosis for controlling weight and headaches. She joined some amateur hypnosis groups, which Tarazi also had joined, and eventually they and some other members began exploring past-life regressions. During Laurel’s first round of hypnotic sessions, she related former lives from a variety of historical periods and geographic locations. But the one that interested her the most, and the one to which she kept returning, was that of a sixteenth-century Spanish woman named Antonia. During eight sessions conducted between June 1977 and January 1978, Laurel gave a great deal of information about Antonia’s life. Three years later, between June 1981 and March 1983, Tarazi conducted thirty-six more sessions, which she tape-recorded and transcribed.

Because Antonia’s story was an erotically charged romantic adventure, Tarazi initially believed that Laurel’s regression was a fantasy, rooted in cryptomnesia and the demand characteristics of the hypnotic experiment. And indeed, Tarazi at first found most of the facts Laurel provided by consulting history books and encyclopedias, ‘albeit with difficulty’.^[7] But Laurel also mentioned names and events that Tarazi was unable to trace at the time, and as her investigation progressed, she discovered that Laurel was providing an astonishing amount of detailed and exceptionally obscure information about the appropriate period and locale of Antonia’s alleged life. Occasionally, that information even conflicted with authoritative sources, but Tarazi later confirmed Antonia’s claims by diligently tracking down even more obscure and

reliable sources. Interestingly, she was never able to find evidence of a person matching Antonia's description and alleged history. However, if Antonia's story is true, that fact would not be especially remarkable.

'Antonia'

And that story certainly seems like the stuff of a romance novel. In fact, in 1997 Tarazi published Antonia's story as a 650-page first-person narrative.^[8] According to 'Antonia', her full name was Antonia Michaela Maria Ruiz de Prado, and she was born November 15, 1555, on the island of Hispaniola to a Spanish officer and his German wife. After her mother's death in 1569, Antonia was raised in Germany by her uncle Karl, a former priest who had left the clergy to marry. By the time Antonia arrived he was a university professor and widower, and he successfully imparted to his niece his love of learning and his independence of thought. In 1580 Karl and Antonia moved to Oxford, and although Karl had by then abandoned Catholicism, he never imposed his views on Antonia, who remained a devout Catholic.

After Karl's death, Antonia went to Spain to join her father (Antonio) at the inn he now owned and managed in Cuenca. But when she arrived there in May 1584, she learned that her father had died ten days earlier and that the inn was seriously in debt. Despite her grief, Antonia worked hard to integrate herself into the community and make the inn a success.

Antonia was unaware that the Inquisition had been observing her carefully during this period. In fact, because her father had been a close friend of Inquisitor Arganda, the Inquisition knew a great deal about Antonia from the moment she arrived in Spain. The dying Antonio had feared that his daughter would not fare well on her own, and Arganda promised to care for her as if she was his own daughter, at least so long as it did not conflict with his duties as Inquisitor. As a final (but perhaps unwise) gesture of trust, Antonio handed over his daughter's letters to Arganda. These detailed uncle Karl's heresies and the tradition of free-thinking to which Antonia had been exposed. But Antonio also knew that the letters documented his daughter's loyal Catholicism. He hoped that Arganda would be impressed by this and realize that although Antonia had been exposed to unacceptable ideas, she remained steadfast in her devotion to the Church and to Spain.

Arganda and his fellow Inquisitor were, indeed, impressed by Antonia's piety and loyalty to Spain. They were also impressed by her sensuous beauty. But they remained suspicious of her background, her failure to confess voluntarily to the Inquisition (Antonia hadn't realized that was the law), and her associations with suspect individuals. So they summoned Antonia three times for typically intense questioning, and once they arrested her. After several months in prison and a full confession, Antonia paid a heavy fine, performed other penances, and eventually returned to her business. Normally, an arrest by the Inquisition would have disgraced Antonia and all her descendants. But because of her special relationship with one of the Inquisitors (more on this later) and an important personal favor she performed for the other, a spilled bottle of ink 'accidentally' obliterated her folio. As a result, the Inquisition records, otherwise scrupulously detailed, contain no mention of Antonia.

Antonia lost her virginity around the age of twenty-nine, when a man took her by force in the torture chamber. The eroticism of this assault aroused all her passions and revealed her masochistic tendencies. She had secretly adored this man before, and now she fell madly in love with him and eventually bore him a son. Their relationship evolved from lustful self-indulgence to a deep and all-consuming physical and spiritual union. (This romantic and erotic aspect of Antonia's life was unlike anything reported during Laurel's other past-life regressions.) Together, they traveled widely and enjoyed many adventures, including encounters with Satanists and pirates, and culminating in a visit to Peru, where Antonia met her previously unknown uncle, Inquisitor Juan Ruiz de Prado. On their return voyage, Antonia drowned near a small Caribbean island. Her lover tried desperately to save her, nearly drowning in the process.

Investigation

Of course, Tarazi wondered whether Antonia's story was true. She claimed that Antonia's narrative is correct for several hundred historical facts mentioned over the forty-four hypnotic sessions. Many of the facts and historical figures are likely to be known by any well-read person—for example, the existence of a Spanish Inquisition and Spanish Armada, and the monarchs Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots. Moreover, Tarazi estimated that fifty or sixty details of Spanish, English, or Dutch history were relatively easy to find in books and encyclopedias—for example, concerning Don Bernadino de Mendoza (Spanish ambassador to England) or the Duke of Parma. However, it is difficult to see how someone could spontaneously relate these facts, or provide them in answer to direct questions, without a substantial education in sixteenth-century European history and a very good memory. Furthermore,

Another 25 to 30 highly specialized facts were located with much greater difficulty. Even though these are published in English, it was necessary to check the Chicago Public Library, Newberry Library, and several university libraries

(Northwestern, Northeastern, Loyola, DePaul, University of Illinois, and University of Chicago) to verify them all. Examples include: Date of the first publication of the Edict of Faith on the Island of Hispaniola; Spanish laws governing shipping to the Indies; types of ships used in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and details about them; dates and contents of the Spanish indexes of prohibited books and how they differed from the Roman Index; names of priests executed in England in 1581 and 1582, and the method of execution; and information about a college in Cuenca. Over a dozen facts did not seem to be published in English at all but only in Spanish. A few could only be found in the Municipal and others in the Diocesan Archives in Cuenca, Spain.^[9]

Concerned that the apparent obscurity of these facts merely reflected her lack of expertise in history, Tarazi sent a questionnaire to nine professors at the six largest universities in the Chicago area. For each of sixty alleged facts, it asked them to rank the likelihood of a non-historian being able to find the information revealed by Antonia. Seven of the nine professors replied, and the responses confirmed Tarazi's suspicion that Antonia was indeed supplying extremely recondite information.

Some of the material concerning Cuenca is especially interesting. On two of the questionnaire items Laurel contradicted Spanish authorities, and in both cases research showed that she was correct. Antonia's description of the building housing the Inquisition did not match the one supplied by the Government Tourist Office in Cuenca. But Tarazi found an obscure Spanish book on Cuenca, which mentioned that in December 1583 the Tribunal moved from the address given by the Tourist Office to an old castle overlooking the town. That event was five months before Antonia claimed to arrive in Cuenca (in May 1584), and the castle fit Antonia's description very closely. Moreover, in a follow-up visit to Spain in 1989, Tarazi found additional information in the Episcopal Archives that also corresponded to Antonia's account.

Antonia's reference to a college in Cuenca was also controversial. Both Tarazi and the history professors thought this matter would be easy to check. But it was not. Tarazi found no college in Cuenca, nor any reference to one in encyclopedias, history, or travel books. Not even the archivist at the Municipal Archives in Cuenca claimed to have heard of a college there. But Antonia insisted that students and faculty from the college met regularly at her inn. Then at the suggestion of a consultant at Northwestern University, Tarazi called Loyola University and was told that if there was a college in Cuenca, it might be mentioned in an old seven-volume work in Spanish.^[10] In Volume 2 (pp. 131, 595) of that work Tarazi found references to the founding of a college in Cuenca in the mid-sixteenth century. She states, plausibly, that 'Even a person who reads Spanish is not likely to wade through this tome unless involved in historical research'.^[11]

A similar disagreement concerned Antonia's claim that Cuenca had only two Inquisitors. This conflicted with the opinion of Tarazi's experts that there should have been three Inquisitors and that the Inquisition always used three. Once again, Antonia was right. During the period Antonia claimed to live in Cuenca, from 1584 to 1588, there were only the two Inquisitors she mentioned (Ximines de Reynoso and de Arganda). Before that there were the customary three.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Antonia's story concerns her claim that, for a time, she became the mistress of one of the Inquisitors. Initially, Antonia resisted and tried appealing to the Inquisitor's sense of honor as a conscientious agent of the Church. As she tells it,

Can you honestly believe that such a willful and deliberate sin will not alter your decisions as Inquisitor'? I asked coolly. He sighed: 'I suppose in a way it already has. In reviewing my cases recently, I noticed that they indicate a far more lenient view of fornication since I decided to indulge myself. To me the liberality was so striking that I feared it might arouse suspicion in the Suprema. I suppose I shall have to revert to my sterner judgments.'^[12]

The Inquisition records for Cuenca seem to bear this out. During the period when Antonia claimed to be the Inquisitor's object of desire, there was a sharp decline in the percentage of people penanced for fornication. Presumably, those arrested for fornication were instead released for insufficient evidence or granted a suspended sentence. The figures are interesting. In 1582, 73% of those arrested for fornication were penanced. In 1583 it was 75%. In 1584 (but before Antonia's arrival): 60%; for the next five months: 10%; for the end of the year (when she was under suspicion): 100%. Then in 1585, when Antonia worked for the Inquisitors and had her affair with one of them, the figure is 11%. In 1586 it was 35%, and in 1587 it was 50%.

Although Tarazi found no evidence that Antonia ever existed, we should note that she did not even look for certain records. Tarazi argued that if Antonia's story is true, it is highly unlikely that crucial records were ever made, or that they survived. Antonia claimed to be born on an isolated plantation on Hispaniola and baptized at a small local church whose name she could not recall. It is also unlikely that there would be records of her marriage by an unofficial priest at her husband's home, or of her death by drowning off an unnamed Caribbean island.

Tarazi was appropriately cautious about there being no mention of Antonia in the otherwise meticulous and accurate Inquisition records. She noted that Antonia's explanation for this, while plausible, seems suspiciously convenient. She wrote,

When I checked the Inquisition records, I found no missing number where her folio should have fit, and asked her about this. She said that the Inquisitors had probably foreseen the desirability of eliminating her file and probably gave it a number identical to another but with an 'A' after it so that there would be no gap in the record. A check showed that this practice was indeed sometimes followed, although probably not usually for this reason.^[13]

Cryptomnesia

Alan Gauld expressed reasonable suspicions about the evidential value of this case. One concern is the possibility that Laurel once read (and then later forgot) an obscure historical novel rich in accurate details of the period. Certainly, there is a precedent for that concern; there is considerable evidence for this sort of cryptomnesia—for example, the 'Blanche Poynings' case.^[14] In several other cases, obscure names and other historical details given by regression subjects, that seemed convincing evidence of genuine past lives, could be traced to historical fiction.

However, Gauld's search for such a novel has so far been unsuccessful. Tarazi, likewise, found no book with the relevant information. For reasons of space, we cannot review all the considerations leading Tarazi to rule out what Braude called the Usual (and Unusual) Suspects as explanations for this case.^[15] Commendably, Tarazi seems sensitive to relevant psychological subtleties, and she appears to have investigated Laurel's background carefully to determine the likelihood of either fraud or cryptomnesia. To see why she rules out those options, readers are urged to look closely at Tarazi's report and examine her detailed summary of Laurel's history.

Living-Agent Psi vs Survival

Not surprisingly, we need at this point to consider the viability of a motivated living-agent-psi explanation, assuming the Usual and Unusual Suspects have been eliminated. And in that connection, what matters particularly is the lack of evidence, not only for the existence of Antonia, but also for her uncle Karl. Fortunately, Alan Gauld offered to help Stephen Braude examine the case, and so he undertook a characteristically tenacious and careful search for traces of Antonia and Karl in England. He assumed, reasonably, that such traces would exist given Karl's academic affiliations and Antonia's alleged political activism. But that search, too, turned up nothing. Perhaps in light of the Patience Worth case, we should be especially wary of treating the Antonia case as evidence of survival. Both Pearl Curran and Laurel exhibited surprising amounts of recondite background knowledge—in Pearl's case, of biblical history.

Admittedly, it is not difficult to imagine why Laurel (or virtually anyone) might have been motivated to be obsessed with a highly romantic, adventurous, and erotic life history. But as Tarazi recognized, psychodynamics will not, by itself, account for the factual material in the story. Considering the accuracy, abundance, and obscurity of details, and their disparate and varied sources, one can reasonably argue that a living-agent psi explanation of this case is less parsimonious than a survivalist alternative.

A few more details are worth mentioning. To emphasize the difficulty of learning the relevant information by normal means, Tarazi writes,

Even some material from American libraries would have been difficult for her to obtain. Not only were the books old, rare, highly specialized, and in a language which L.D. did not read, but they contained many quotes from 16th-century Spanish that present a problem to the average native Spanish speaker and even for the Spanish teachers whom I contacted. Nor were there only a few such books; rather, about 30 each contribute new facts.^[16]

Moreover, Tarazi noted that this case was impressive right from the start, both in its specificity of information and in the way it was revealed. Whereas Laurel's other regressions had a nebulous quality, 'Antonia came through as a proud, independent woman who knew exactly who, what, and where she was'.^[17] Laurel's hypnotist for the first set of sessions was a person born, raised, and educated in Holland, with a good command of Dutch history. His pointed questioning of Antonia led to some interesting revelations early on. Tarazi writes,

Most persons who know the Dutch history of the period would have said, as many history books do, that the governor at the time was the Duke of Parma. Asked about this, Antonia said that he was the son of Margaret of Parma, but not the Duke. She was correct for that date. Alexander Farnese did not succeed to that title until 1586.^[18]

That was in Laurel's first session. Also in that session she displayed

some knowledge of a few battles in which her father had reportedly participated in 1567-1569, under Don Fernando de Toledo who, she claimed, was then the Spanish Governor. The hypnotist told her she was wrong: the Duke of Alva was governor then. She replied: 'Of course. That is his title. I gave his name'. The title is much more well known. Even some history books neglect to give his name. It was the extreme accuracy of the numerous details that affected Antonia's 'life' together with relative ignorance of contemporary events unrelated to it that presented such an intriguing contrast from the very first session.^[19]

The foregoing exchange is interesting for another reason. It illustrates why Tarazi ruled out explanations in terms of familiar hypnotic compliance and demand characteristics of the regression. Laurel clearly resisted overt pressure from her interlocutors, on this and on other occasions, to give the responses they encouraged or believed to be correct. In fact, Tarazi agreed to accept Laurel as a client because she wanted to help her break free of her preoccupation with Antonia, which had led her to neglect other people and activities in her present life. Tarazi hoped to convince Laurel that this past life was pure fantasy and that the love reportedly experienced by Antonia was merely the stuff of fiction and dreams. Her plan, at least initially, was to confront Laurel with errors in her depiction of the facts.

Some of Laurel's (or Antonia's) emotions during her regressions are noteworthy as well. They tend to strengthen the conviction that her responses were not artifacts of suggestion and hypnotic compliance. For example, when she saw the building identified incorrectly by Spanish authorities as the one housing the Inquisition tribunal,

she was stunned. All present observed her dramatic change in mood from eager anticipation to a deep depression. It never occurred to her to question the authorities. In quiet resignation she said her whole story must have been imagination.^[20]

Later, Tarazi found the obscure Spanish book containing the correct information, in the Newberry Library. Laurel claimed never to have visited Newberry, and besides, the library there does not circulate books, and it keeps a record of all visitors.

Eventually, Tarazi used hypnosis to help her client let go of Antonia's story. She asked Laurel, under hypnosis, to live out the unfinished part of Antonia's life, telling her that Antonia's son had not died and that Antonia had been rescued from her near drowning. Tarazi suggested, further, that Antonia and her lover returned to Spain and lived out a healthy life there. Laurel complied with the suggestions, and Tarazi's therapeutic strategy seems to have worked. Laurel finally lost her desire to have further regressions, and she took a renewed interest in her own life. But what is noteworthy is that her newly fantasized story was of an entirely different quality than the original one. 'No new facts could be produced. No more adventures occurred... Most descriptions were far less vivid and lacked the emotion of the original narration.'^[21]

Curiously, perhaps, there is little evidence of xenoglossy in this case. Tarazi said Antonia spoke no Spanish spontaneously, and only a little Spanish and Latin responsively. Regrettably, Tarazi did not provide details of the few apparent instances of responsive xenoglossy. But she noted that Spanish-speaking persons at the sessions claimed that Antonia pronounced Spanish words and names very well. Moreover, Antonia 'recited the prayers required by the Inquisition in Latin, referred to special methods of making the sign of the cross, the *signo* and *santiguado*, unknown to most Spanish-speaking priests today, and composed words and music to a song in Latin'.^[22] At the very least, that is not what one would expect of a person of German ancestry and a Lutheran or Methodist religious background.

Conclusion

Despite reasonable concerns about the unreliability and creative potential of apparent past-life regressions, the Antonia case at least poses problems for skeptics of survival. It may not conclusively rule out appeals to living-agent psi, but it comes as close as perhaps any case in the survival literature to stretching the living-agent psi alternative to the breaking point.

Stephen Braude

Literature

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ See Venn, 1986 for a good example.
- 2.^ See, for example, O'Connell, Shor, & Orne, 1970; Orne, 1951; Spiegel & Spiegel, 1978.
- 3.^ Stanford psychiatrist David Spiegel filmed a subject who, under hypnosis, started talking like a typical contemporary channel or medium. His apparent trance mediumship lacked the fluency of seasoned New-Age channels, but nevertheless, he adopted novel speech patterns, tone of voice, and the awkward body language presumably appropriate to one who finds himself in a strange body and unexpected surroundings. As far as could be determined, this subject had not previously displayed the capacity to produce spontaneously consistent dramatic impersonations. It is reasonable to think that hypnosis enabled him to accomplish what his normal fears and inhibitions might otherwise have prevented.
- 4.^ For a superb survey, see Gauld, 1992.
- 5.^ In a case reported by Spiegel and Spiegel (1978) a twenty-five-year-old man, who learned English only after emigrating from Austria at age thirteen, when regressed to any age younger than thirteen could apparently speak no English and required the hypnotist to communicate through a German-speaking interpreter. However, the subject was still able to respond correctly to some instructions given in English. For other relevant cases see Orne (1951 & 1972).

- 6.^ Tarazi, 1990.
- 7.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 311.
- 8.^ Tarazi, 1997.
- 9.^ Tarazi, 1990, pp. 316-17.
- 10.^ Astrain, 1912.
- 11.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 321.
- 12.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 339.
- 13.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 323.
- 14.^ Dickinson, 1911; see also Kampman, 1976; Kampman & Hirvenoja, 1976.
- 15.^ Braude, 2003.
- 16.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 329.
- 17.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 320.
- 18.^ Ibid.
- 19.^ Ibid.
- 20.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 329.
- 21.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 328.
- 22.^ Tarazi, 1990, p. 323.