

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Marco Levi Bianchini: A Forgotten Italian Supporter of Parapsychology

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Abstract—For different reasons, many of the past Italian psychical researchers are only half known or are completely forgotten today. This is the case of the neuropsychiatrist Marco Levi Bianchini, who worked in the first half of the 20th century. Beside his conventional clinical activity, he was engaged in a lot of different topics, but at present he is remembered first of all to have been the first, or one of the first, professionals to introduce and promote psychoanalytic doctrine in Italy. Levi Bianchini was very interested in, and looked with favour on, metapsychical issues, and in particular psi cognitive phenomena. He published a few papers on telepathic and precognitive dreams, and he adhered to the ideas that Cazzamalli was developing about some asserted brain radio-emissions that should be able to explain effects such as dowsing, telepathy, and precognition. More than his original contributions to the parapsychology literature, an undoubted historical merit of Marco Levi Bianchini was his job as a book reviewer, which he performed during all his life, introducing to the academic and psychiatric circles in Italy hundreds of international and national books on parapsychological topics, therefore greatly promoting this culture in the country.

Keywords: Marco Levi Bianchini—history of parapsychology—Italy

Italian psychical research comprises many interesting figures who have been forgotten from the historical record (Biondi, 1988; Biondi & Tressoldi, 2007: 68–79). One of these individuals is psychiatrist Marco Levi Bianchini (M.L.B., 1875–1961). I present here a brief overview of his contributions to psychical research.

M.L.B. is generally credited to have been one of the first scholars who introduced psychoanalytic themes in Italy.¹ He became familiar with Freudian works in the early 1910s and published a monograph about hysteria and sexuality in which he discussed psychoanalytic concepts (Levi Bianchini, 1913). In 1920 he initiated a psychiatric journal, the *Archivio di Neurologia e Psichiatria* [*Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*]; in the following year, he added the expression “*e Psicoanalisi*” [*and Psychoanalysis*] to the title. Other journals that he later founded had similar designations. In 1922 M.L.B. participated in the Berlin

Meeting of Psychoanalysis, where Freud was present (Levi Bianchini, 1922a,b), and in 1925 he established and directed an Italian Society of Psychoanalysis. In subsequent years, he translated into Italian and published some works of Sigmund Freud. He defended psychoanalysis from attacks originating from Catholic and philosophical (idealistic) circles, and continued to promote it incessantly until 1938, when newly introduced racist laws forced every activity related to this discipline to be stopped. Psychoanalysis was considered to be too closely connected to Judaism and, therefore, many Jewish psychoanalysts and psychiatrists were forced to flee Italy (as Edoardo Weiss, Cesare Musatti, and Emilio Servadio) or to retire (Gustavo Modena) (Accerboni, 2002; Micela, 1979; Prodi, 2002; Rocca, 2003). M.L.B., who had been a fascist but was of Jewish descent, decided to resign as chief of the Asylum of Nocera Inferiore (a little town in the south of Italy) and to halt his scientific activities, including his involvement with psychoanalysis. He devoted himself to the private practice of neuropsychiatry.

After World War II, he asked to be reinstated as chief of the Asylum, but because another psychiatrist had been named chief in the interim, he was appointed only as “second chief”. This state of affairs created serious difficulties for him, so he left the Asylum and, until his death, dedicated himself mainly to writing scientific papers and paying less attention to psychoanalytic issues. It appears that he never practiced psychoanalysis, and that he barely used its concepts in his therapeutic activity (Ceccarelli, 1999; Galiani & Cotrufo, 2007).

In the relevant number of studies regarding this figure recently published, almost nothing has been discussed about another one of M.L.B.’s lifelong concerns, i.e., his “involvement” in psychical research or, as it was preferentially named in Italy at that time, *metapsychics*, from the term proposed by Charles Richet in 1905 (Alvarado, 2008). It seems that he never performed experimental research in this area, even though he claimed to be a supporter of this line of inquiry, nor was he engaged in committees or societies devoted to parapsychology. Instead, he published texts and showed much interest toward topics in this field. These interests included mediumship, spontaneous psi phenomena, dowsing, and research on brain neurophysiology during exceptional experiences, as well as spiritistic ideas (which he never had), and theories based on “another” physics.

During the years 1920–1938, M.L.B. authored in the *Archivio di Neurologia, Psichiatria e Psicoanalisi*, and subsequently in other journals, more than 10,000 (10,000!) book reviews about a lot of topics that he classified under *areas*. One of these was “Area 3: General and Experimental Psychology, Development Psychology, Psychophysiology, Pedagogy, Psychotherapy, Psycho-pedagogy, Applied Psychology, Philosophy, Metapsychics”. Here, he introduced to Italian academic circles many books published all over the world (M.L.B. knew many languages and wrote reviews of books published in French, German, English, and Spanish). These reviews, for the most part brief, usually contained a synthesis of the book’s contents and ended with a concise judgement about the value of the work, and the possibility that it may promote further research and progress in the involved field. As well as obscure and neglected books, he also considered many

famous ones, like Flammarion's *La mort et son mystère* (1921–1922, reviewed 1923), Schrenck-Notzing's *Phenomena of Materialization* (1923), Rhine's *Extrasensory Perception* (1934) and *New Frontiers of the Mind* (in Italian as *Le frontiere della mente*, 1950), Richet's *Traité de Métapsychique* (1922, reviewed 1935), Palmès' *Metapsiquica y Espiritismo* (1950), Emile Tizané's *Sur la piste de l'homme inconnu* (1952), and so on. Among the more distinguished Italian authors he reviewed, there were scholars such as Ernesto Bozzano (various monographs published between 1929 and 1937), William Mackenzie (*Metapsichica Moderna*, 1923), Emilio Servadio (*La Ricerca Psichica*, 1930), and Cesare Vesme (*A History of Experimental Spiritualism*, 1931).

Furthermore, as editor in chief of his journals, M.L.B. opened their pages to contributions by other authors about psychic, or “occult”, issues. Among the papers specifically addressing the field, some were particularly relevant, such as those authored by the engineers L. Batoni and Nicola Brunori proposing that, because the human body acts as a radio, supernormal experiences could be explained in this way (Batoni, 1932; Brunori & Torrioni, 1930). There were also papers by the Hungarian physician A. Funk, discussing hypnosis (Funk, 1935); by the Argentinian physician and parapsychologist Orlando Canavesio, discussing his studies on electroencephalographic records during metapsychic experiences (Biondi, 2009; Canavesio, 1955a,b); and by the psychologist Ettore Patini, reporting on the phenomena of a famous Italian psychic (Patini, 1953). The psychoanalyst and parapsychologist Emilio Servadio, author of a lot of book reviews, wrote about “paranormal dreams” (Servadio, 1961),² a subject that the physician Giuseppe Marulli, of the Nocera Asylum, also dealt with more than one time (Marulli, 1951 [republished in 1953], 1965). The dowser and agronomist Luigi Caccia published some papers on water dowsing, a phenomenon that national political authorities viewed with great interest in those years when the Italian forces were engaged in the conquest of desert territories in Africa (Caccia, 1933, 1934, 1935).

In 1930, Levi Bianchini published a short paper (the abstract of a lecture addressed to the first International Congress on Mental Health in Washington, DC) on the possibility that “radiations” emanating from the human body could be used for therapeutic aims (Levi Bianchini & Moriondi, 1930). In this proposal, he referred to the ideas and experimental research of another Italian neuropsychiatrist, Ferdinando Cazzamalli, in those years working on the possibility to instrumentally show brain radio-emissions during abnormal states of the mind, a theory Brunori also supported (Brunori, 1927, 1952; Brunori & Torrioni, 1930; Cazzamalli, 1929).

From the inception of the Italian Society of Metapsychics, established by Cazzamalli, M.L.B. followed its activities, but it is dubious if he ever attended local or national meetings organized by that Society. The fact is that in the first issue of *Metapsichica*, the official journal of the Society, there is a paper by M.L.B., reporting a few cases of clairvoyant and precognitive dreams experienced by different subjects (Levi Bianchini, 1946). After a detailed report of these

experiences, the author tried to answer some questions, and in particular, What, if any, is the difference between normal, neurotic, and metapsychic dreams? From where do the metapsychic dreams originate?

About the first problem, M.L.B. noted that the clairvoyant dreams he reported possessed the same features as the ordinary ones. They were clear and had a direct meaning, without the changes and distortions claimed by psychoanalysts. In other words, they had a manifest sense, but not a hidden content. Similar to the dreams of neurotics, however, the metapsychic dreams occurred to subjects in a strong emotional state. All of this, M.L.B. concluded, points to the midbrain, the seat of instincts and emotions, as the place where “supernormal” dreams originate (Levi Bianchini, 1946). Three years later, a shorter version of this paper was published in the medico-parapsychological journal *Canavesio* established in Argentina (Levi Bianchini, 1949).

In 1950, another paper appeared, again in *Metapsichica*, relating new “paranormal” dreams M.L.B. had recently found. Different from the previous ones, these dreams were mostly symbolic and obscure, so M.L.B. had been compelled to resort to psychoanalytic tools to understand and clarify their dynamics. In the references of the paper, other than many metapsychic works, psychological and psychoanalytic texts were cited, including books and articles by S. Freud, E. Servadio, H. J. Urban, N. Fodor, J. Eisenbud, and G. Murphy (Levi Bianchini, 1950). It was probably to promote knowledge of metapsychic topics in the psychiatric community that M.L.B. published the same paper in the journal he directed at the time (Levi Bianchini, 1951). There, also, he communicated the case of three “precognitive” dreams that occurred during the same night to various members of one family (Levi Bianchini & Marulli, 1951).

M.L.B. died abruptly in 1961, due to a cardiac crisis. No obituaries, articles, or papers about him appeared then or later in the specialized or popular press, discussing or remembering his low-key interest in parapsychology. After having contributed widely to propagating parapsychological culture in Italian academic circles, in particular between psychiatrists, neurologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts, Marco Levi Bianchini was suddenly forgotten and his name never surfaced again as regards parapsychology.

Notes

¹ Among the Italian “professional” people that were first fascinated by Freudian theory, and authors of papers and books on the issue (not necessarily practicing psychoanalysis with therapeutic aims), historians remember the physicians Edoardo Weiss and Luigi Assagioli and the psychiatrists Sante de Sanctis (the first one to become professor of psychology), Luigi Baroncini, and Gustavo Modena. Of these, Baroncini and Modena were the first authors in Italy to publish scientific papers on psychoanalysis, in 1908 and 1909. Weiss was the only one to become a psychoanalyst (Accerboni, 2002; Micela, 1979; Prodi, 2002; Rocca, 2003).

² It may be interesting to note that during the 1930s Servadio published short papers and book reviews about psychoanalysis in M.L.B.’s journal. After World War II, when he

came back to Italy, he collaborated with another journal directed by M.L.B., *Annali di Neuropsichiatria e Psicoanalisi*, where he published papers and dozens of book reviews, many of which were about psychology, psychoanalysis, and parapsychology. Servadio was a polyglot, so he could review works in French, English, and German.

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