

ESSAY REVIEW

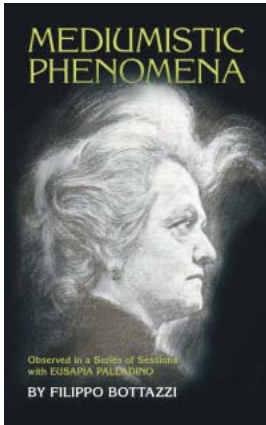
Bottazzi and Palladino: The 1907 Seances

Mediumistic Phenomena: Observed in a Series of Sessions with Eusapia Palladino by Filippo Bottazzi, translated by Irmeli Routti and Antonio Giuditta. Princeton, NJ: ICRL Press, 2011. 201 pp. \$12.95. ISBN 9781936033058.

In 1908 a student of psychic phenomena stated that Italian medium Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918) had been mentioned thousands of times in the reviews of psychic topics. About her mediumship, we were told, “now there exists an entire library” (Morselli 1908, Vol. 1:132). The book commented on here is part of that library.

Palladino showed mental phenomena such as communications said to come mainly from her spirit control John King, but her performances consisted mostly of physical phenomena such as movement of objects, imprints on clay, luminous effects, raps, touches, cold winds, and materializations. While she belongs to the old days of psychical research, her presence still lingers among us, as seen in defenses of the reality of her manifestations (e.g., Braude 2007), in historical overviews (e.g., Blondel 2002), and in papers that have been published in relatively recent issues of the *JSE* (Alvarado 2011, Giuditta 2010).

As I have argued before, Palladino’s case was important for the development of psychical research in various ways (Alvarado 1993, 2011). Historically speaking, the medium’s performances were a factor that led researchers to produce methodological and conceptual developments, and the sensational character of her phenomena and the publicity around them created various images about mediumship. But such performances also provided much evidence for the reality of physical phenomena. In fact, she convinced many influential researchers of the genuineness of her manifestations, as seen in overviews such as Carrington’s *Eusapia Palladino and Her Phenomena* (1909). This was the case with Alexander Aksakov (1832–1902), Hereward Carrington (1880–1958), Albert de Rochas (1837–1914), Everard Feilding (1867–1936), Camille Flammarion (1842–1925), Oliver Lodge (1851–1940), Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), Joseph Maxwell (1858–1938), Enrico Morselli (1852–1929), Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901), Charles Richet (1850–1935), Albert F. von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929), and Julian Ochorowicz (1850–1917).



In 1907 Italian physiologist Filippo Bottazzi (1867–1941) joined the ranks of investigators of Palladino who became convinced of her phenomena. By this time Bottazzi’s scientific career was established, his having won several awards and important university appointments. He went on to become even more eminent in later years, although it has been argued that he has been somewhat forgotten (Stanzione 2011). His work on Palladino, first published in Italian in the *Rivista d’Italia* (Bottazzi 1907a), was translated and published in the same year in French (Bottazzi 1907b) and English (Bottazzi 1907c). The studies received much publicity in several European countries, as seen in magazines and journals published in Italy (Lombroso 1907), Austria (S 1907), and France (Van Thieghem 1907). There were also many discussions of the seances in the United States, as seen in writer Hamlin Garland’s (1860–1940) book *The Shadow World* (1908) and in historian and writer Gustavus Myers’ (1872–1942) *Beyond the Borderline of Life* (1910), not to mention many articles in magazines such as the *American Review of Reviews* (The Progress of the World 1907). Somewhat later Bottazzi (1909) presented a similar account of the seances in a book entitled *Fenomeni Medianici Osservati in una Serie di Sedute Fatte con Eusapia Paladino*, which recent translation is the topic of this review.

Mediumistic Phenomena is the result of neurobiologist Antonio Giuditta’s interest in the seances Bottazzi had with Palladino in 1907. His work has been presented to members of the Society for Scientific Exploration both in a paper delivered at the Eighth European SSE Meeting held in Italy in August of 2009 and in an article published in the Society’s *Journal* (Giuditta 2010). The book was translated by Giuditta, together with Irmeli Routti.

It consists of a report of eight seances conducted in Bottazzi’s laboratory in which a variety of instrumental studies were made. Many of the seances were attended as well by physicians and scientists. Some of them included Gino Galeotti (professor of general pathology), Tommaso De Amicis (professor of dermatology and syphilography), Oscar Carpa (professor of physics), Luigi Lombardi (professor of electrotechnology), and Sergio Pansini (professor of medical semiotics). There were also others who joined some of the seances, among them engineer Emmanuela Jona, senator Antonio Cardarelli, and Bottazzi’s wife. Her full name, which is not mentioned in the report, was Annunziata Fabbri.

By the time Bottazzi entered the scene there had been a long history of studies of physical mediums and of Palladino in particular, not to mention a rich Italian history of the subject, ably documented by Massimo Biondi (1988). But Bottazzi admitted in his Introduction that he “had read little or nothing of” (p. 4) mediumistic phenomena. He stated that he had heard of the studies of Richet and others and that he had been impressed by Barzini’s articles on Palladino published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The articles led him first to a state of doubt and then to being interested in studying the topic himself. This was a reference to journalist Luigi Barzini (1874–1947), who popularized the medium in his articles, works that were collected in a book (Barzini 1907/1984).

Bottazzi stated that not all the phenomena witnessed by him and his collaborators were included in the book. For example, in the account of the first seance he stated: “Given the little relevance of the phenomena observed during the first session, the sequence of their appearance is not worth describing. I will summarize in few words the results obtained” (p. 39). Later Bottazzi said: “Not caring about the precise sequence of observed events, I prefer to describe them briefly” (p. 45). Nonetheless the book contains many descriptions such as the following.

At one point during the fifth seance a switch that was connected to a lamp was moved around and thrown on the seance table by an “invisible hand.” The light was then turned on and off several times. Later on:

The switch was placed on the table. Eusapia said: “Look how it is moving.” We all fixed our gaze on the small object and we saw that it rose a few millimeters above the table top, oscillated and vibrated, as if invaded by an interior quiver. Eusapia’s hands, held by Galeotti and me, were at least thirty centimeters away from the switch. (p. 113)

Regarding one common phenomena, table levitations, Bottazzi wrote in his account of the fourth seance:

We obtained a levitation lasting about 10 seconds at a height of 30–40 cm and a shorter but higher one while Palladino was the only one standing up. Finally, at the end of the session, an additional levitation occurred that lasted several seconds while all of us were standing up at Palladino’s request. . . . Sometimes we tried all together to lower it by pressing its surface with our hands, but without success. It yielded and lowered a little but as soon as we let go our hands it rose up again. (p. 89)

An interesting phenomenon, and one reported frequently by previous investigators of Palladino, was that of synchronisms. As Bottazzi explained:

Any mediumistic event was almost always occurring simultaneously with movements of one or more parts of the *medium’s* body. . . . (p. 62)

For example, during the second seance:

The table started moving by steps, every pull perfectly corresponding to pressures and pulls made by Palladino's hands on our hands (mine and Pansini's). . . . Every pull of the small table corresponded in perfect synchrony with a push by Eusapia's leg against Jona's knee and with the contraction of her thigh muscles. (p. 46)

Bottazzi stated that the synchrony between actions showed "a common point of origin," the will of the medium (p. 127).

Interestingly Mrs. Bottazzi seemed to attract phenomena such as touches. In answer to the question if she had mediumistic powers, the medium's spirit control John King answered in the affirmative. As her husband wrote about the third seance:

The curtain swelled around her several times, like hugging. She was unceasingly touched, fondled (she said it felt like a cat climbing up her right arm toward her shoulder), tapped on her shoulder with something like the open palm of a hand (and we all heard the blows), and she was the one who saw the largest number of apparitions. (p. 60)

Several of the instruments used produced graphic recordings that were presented by Bottazzi to show the objectivity of the manifestations:

The telegraph key was struck several times. . . . We all clearly heard the typical sounds of energetic, quick hits. To certify that it was not an illusion, or a collective hallucination, the second trace from the top . . . shows three groups of signals and two isolated beats in between them. (pp. 71–72)

Other devices produced graphic recordings as well (see photos such as those presented in figures 4, 13, and 15 in the book). There are also brief descriptions of failures to obtain effects on the instruments (e.g., those described on pp. 77–78).

Similar to previous observers, Bottazzi reported some physiological observations of the medium after the seance:

It is noteworthy that after every session Palladino had considerable hyperalgesia (exaggerated sensitivity to pain) on her hands, especially on their back side. She said it felt like burning, as if her hands had been immersed in lye for a long time. In fact, her hands were always red and hot, and the subcutaneous veins appeared full of blood. (p. 132)

Other observations published before the current ones referred to weakness. According to De Rochas (1896), after seances

[the medium] was completely exhausted and nearly unconscious; her face showed fatigue, suffering; she even seemed older. She could hardly stand and had the most complete apathy; we were obliged to hold her under her arms to take her to the dining room. . . . (p. 19)

In addition, and as done by other researchers (Courtier 1908), analyses were made of the content of the medium's urine, before and after the sixth and seventh seances. With regard to the sixth seance, Bottazzi stated:

Comparison of the two samples of urine showed that the one taken after the session was considerably more concentrated. It had a higher specific weight, higher osmotic pressure and electric conductivity. Total nitrogen and albumin were also increased.

Kidneys seemed to produce more concentrated urine during the sessions. Despite the presence of albumin and sugar, values of osmotic pressure and electric conductivity of the urine differed little or not at all from the normal levels. Microscopic examination never showed the presence of kidney cells nor cylinders. This was a strange case of chronic albuminuria without definitive sign of nephritis.

The observation of strong urine acidity and abundant content in uric acid was remarkable. Some uric acid crystals were already present shortly after urine was collected. Their number increased enormously, and the layer they formed with time became macroscopically visible while the urine remained acid. Eusapia was undoubtedly a subject of clearly arthritic character, a uricemic person. (pp. 151–152)

Relevant to these results, and as I have summarized elsewhere (Alvarado 2011), Palladino suffered from diabetes and died of nephritis.

Synchronic phenomena and observations such as the following led Bottazzi to speculate that the medium produced projections from her body such as “invisible hands.” According to his report of the seventh seance:

I saw a human hand of natural color, and I felt with my hand the fingers and the back of a lukewarm, muscular, rough hand. *The hand vanished, and my eyes saw it retreat, describing an arc of a circle. As if entering back into Palladino's body.* (pp. 165–166, italics in the original)

Interestingly, Bottazzi states that during the eighth seance Galeotti saw two left arms in the medium. He presents in his book what I presume is his recollection of Galeotti's statement during the seance:

I see two identical left arms. One is on the table and is the one Mrs. Bottazzi is holding, the other seems to come out from Eusapia's shoulder, to approach Mrs. Bottazzi, touch her, and then return back and melt into Eusapia's body, vanishing. (p. 180)

Such observations led to ideas about a “splitting of . . . physiological personality” (p. 198) consisting of limbs or complete figures emanating from the medium's body. Bottazzi believed that with these hands

[the medium] felt form, consistency, cold and hot, hard and soft, humid and dry, exactly the same way she would feel by touching and feeling with her physical hands. . . . (pp. 117–118).

Furthermore, Bottazzi wrote:

Mediumistic phenomena are not mere hallucinations of those attending sessions known as spiritualistic sittings. They are biological phenomena depending on the MEDIUM's organism. If they are such, they occur AS IF they are operated by the extensions of natural limbs or by additional limbs stemming out of the MEDIUM's body, and returning and dissolving into it after variable time. During those periods they reveal themselves by the sensations they elicit in us as limbs in no essential way different from natural limbs. (p. 201, Bottazzi's italics)

The book is a useful contribution in that it presents in English a difficult-to-obtain book about the medium in question. Contemporary readers will appreciate having a translation of it. While a translation of the original Italian report (Bottazzi 1907a) had been published in the *Annals of Psychical Science* (Bottazzi 1907c), the present translation of the 1909 book has more details, particularly of the eighth seance in which three photographs are included that did not appear in the *Annals* paper. The instrumental and physiological tests show the scientific spirit in which some mediumistic research was conducted in the old days, and serve as a reminder of Italian scientific interest in mediumship, a topic that includes the work of other individuals such as Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Morselli (Iannuzzo 1986).

Furthermore, the book may be evaluated focusing on two different issues. I am referring to evidential considerations as well as issues of historical context. From the evidential point of view it is to be regretted that Bottazzi's initial introductory comments about the medium (pp. 2–11) do not include mention of Palladino's well-known propensity to commit fraud. He mentioned that someone asserted that the medium "is almost always resorting to fraud" (p. 4), but this is quite different from conveying the well-known fact that she was known to commit trickery. The reader has to wait to get to pages 124 and 187 for an admission that others found her in trickery. Bottazzi stated there was no fraud detected in his seances, and he mentions a suspicious, but inconclusive, observation (pp. 122–123). The issue of fraud was mentioned throughout the report (pp. 62, 84, 124), and we are presented with many assurances that the medium's hands were controlled or that they were far from where the phenomena took place (pp. 68–69, 75, 90–91).

Bottazzi would have been more successful in conveying conviction if his report had been more complete and if he had included actual accounts of phenomena and descriptions of controls from his collaborators, as opposed to the summaries he presents in the book. This is not to say that some of the

observations recorded in his book are not impressive or that Bottazzi was a naïve observer. In his words:

She is operating with her legs and feet!
But when her legs are stretched over my
knees, and her feet are propped against
Jona's knees, or are held by Scarpa under
the table, how could these feet drag out
a table or a chair from the mediumistic
cabinet? (p. 192).

Bottazzi went on to list a variety of effects inconsistent with the medium's well-known repertoire of tricks, effects that were similar to those reported by previous observers.

On another issue, documents such as *Mediumistic Phenomena*, be they translations or reprints of old work, are generally presented in context. That is, background information is provided about personalities, investigations, and other events to help contemporary readers understand the document in question because they are generally too removed in time from its original appearance. Unfortunately there is little about this in the book. The meager three pages about Palladino presented at the beginning of the book (pp. v–vii), and the two references presented (p. vii) are not enough to convey to contemporary readers who are not familiar or are only slightly familiar with the medium information about her importance for psychical research. There could have been a more detailed discussion and a bibliography of the investigations of Palladino conducted both before and after 1907, or of the topic of spiritism and mediumship in Italy (Biondi 1988). Furthermore, readers would have welcomed more information about individuals mentioned (e.g., Barzini, p. 4, Flammarion, p. 18, Morselli, p. 189, de Rochas, p. 195) and about the reception of Bottazzi's work (see the opening comments of this review).

I also believe that the book would have been more effective if it would have included information about the existence of a tradition of concepts of force related to physical mediumship relevant to Bottazzi's speculations. Such ideas were prevalent in the literature published before and after the report and consist of a variety of biophysical speculations of projections from the bodies of mediums (Alvarado 2006), including several specifically proposed to account for Palladino's phenomena (Alvarado 1993). An example was Oliver Lodge's (1894) concept of "temporary prolongations" emanating from Palladino's body. Lodge wrote:



Filippo Bottazzi

I myself have been frequently touched by something which might most readily be described as such a prolongation or formation, and have sometimes seen such a thing while it was touching another person. But the effect on an observer is usually more as if the connecting link, if any, were invisible and intangible, or as if a portion of vital or directing energy had been detached, and were producing distant movements without any apparent connexion with the medium. (Lodge 1894:335)

In addition to Lodge, others reported observations of materialized “prolongations” that were consistent with Bottazzi’s ideas (Morselli 1908, Vol. 1:198,212). For example, Albert De Rochas (1896) wrote:

M. Maxwell was invited by Eusapia to watch and had the visual sensation of a forearm and a hand. He saw in front of him, on the strip of the wall illuminated by the crack of the door, the silhouette of a hand and arm that were above the head of M. Sabatier. They appeared to him on several occasions to descend and to raise as if to touch the head of M. Sabatier who said that at that moment he felt various touches. The forearm felt was long and thin. He did not see the continuity with the arm because it was lost in the shadows. . . . (De Rochas 1896:292)

While a more scholarly presentation of the work would have improved the value of this book, this publication is a welcome addition to the literature. If anything, it helps us to recover a piece of the generally forgotten literatures of physical mediumship and of the history of psychical research.

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