

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Mediumship of Carlos Mirabelli (1889–1951)

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Abstract—The case of the Brazilian medium Carlos Mirabelli is one of the most tantalizing and frustrating in psychical research. If his phenomena—especially his psychokinetic manifestations—occurred as reported, he was probably the greatest physical medium of all time. Mirabelli reportedly moved objects (including very large objects) without contact, levitated himself while bound to a chair, and dematerialized and transported objects of all kinds (including himself) to distant locations. Mirabelli also reportedly produced numerous different full-figure materializations in bright daylight, and these were often recognized as deceased relatives, acquaintances, or well-known public figures by those attending the séance. Sitters would watch them form; attending physicians would carefully examine them for up to 30 minutes and report ordinary bodily functions; photographs of the figures would be taken; and then they would slowly dissolve or fade before everyone’s eyes. However, Mirabelli was also clearly guilty of fraud on occasion, including his notorious use of a doctored photo ostensibly showing him to be levitating. His case therefore presents an all-too-familiar challenge to psi research—namely, how to assess cases of so-called “mixed” mediumship.

Introduction

The case of the Brazilian medium Carmine (Carlos) Mirabelli¹ is one of the most tantalizing and frustrating in psychical research. To see why it’s tantalizing, consider how his story has been introduced in two contemporary surveys of the case. Eric Dingwall wrote:

I propose discussing a case in which the most extraordinary occurrences are recorded, so extraordinary indeed that there is nothing like them in the whole range of psychical literature. (Dingwall 1930:296)

Similarly, Guy Playfair writes:

If everything they say about Carmine Mirabelli is true, he was without doubt the most spectacular physical effects medium in history Mirabelli was surely the medium to end all mediums. You name it, and he is said to have

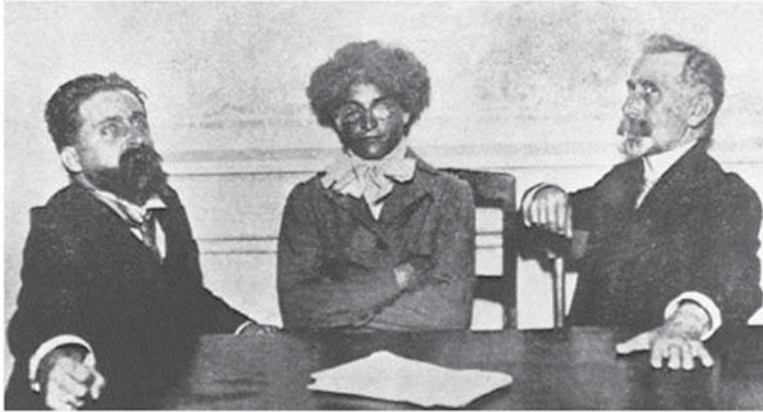


Figure 1. Dr. Carlos de Castro (right) seems alarmed at finding the deceased poet Giuseppe Parini between himself and the entranced Mirabelli.

done it; automatic writing in over thirty languages living or dead, speaking in numerous foreign tongues, materializing objects and people, transporting anything from a bunch of flowers to large pieces of furniture (including levitation of himself even when strapped to a chair), producing impressions of spirit hands in trays of flour or wax inside locked drawers, dematerializing anything in sight, himself included. (Playfair 2011:23)

Furthermore, Mirabelli reportedly produced full-form materializations in bright daylight, and these were often recognized as deceased relatives, acquaintances, or well-known public figures by those attending the séance. Sitters would watch them form; attending physicians would carefully examine them for up to 30 minutes and report ordinary bodily functions; photographs of the figures would be taken (e.g., Figure 1); and then they would slowly dissolve or fade before everyone's eyes. Moreover, Mirabelli reportedly materialized animals as well, such as the dog whose photo appears in the paper by Medeiros (1935).

Unfortunately, however, the case of Mirabelli never received the full scrutiny and documentation accorded Home, Palladino, and some others. In part, this may be due to the prevailing antipathy toward physical mediumship among prominent members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) (Inglis 1984:221ff). That antipathy had arguably reached a zenith over the earlier mediumship of Eusapia Palladino (Braude 1997, Dingwall 1962, Inglis 1977). Moreover—and undoubtedly contributing to the problem—there's some evidence of fraud in Mirabelli's case, most notably a

doctored photograph (discussed later) of the medium apparently levitating (Playfair 1992, 2011).

Nevertheless, Mirabelli's phenomena were witnessed by many people, often under conditions apparently sufficient to rule out fraud, and they were often described in great detail. But most of those accounts were written in Portuguese, and for that reason they may have been either ignored or unfairly discounted by Anglo-American and European researchers.²

Beginnings

Mirabelli was born to Italian parents in Brazil in 1889, and Playfair writes that "like many sons of immigrants he never quite mastered either his ancestors' or his adopted country's language. He learned some English and possibly also some German, but certainly became no skilled linguist" (Playfair 2011:25).

Mirabelli's history with psychokinesis seems to have begun in his early twenties, with some poltergeist-like outbreaks while he was employed at a shoe store. Legend has it that shoeboxes would fly off the shelves and sometimes follow the fleeing Mirabelli into the street. As a result, many concluded that Mirabelli was insane, and before long he was committed to an asylum. However, the psychiatrists in charge apparently had other ideas, and rather than putting Mirabelli into a straitjacket, they ran some tests and found that he could move objects at a distance. Their conclusion was that although Mirabelli was not normal, he was not insane. In their opinion, the phenomena occurring in Mirabelli's vicinity were "the result of the radiation of nervous forces that we all have, but that Mr Mirabelli has in extraordinary excess" (Inglis 1984:222, Playfair 2011:25). So after a stay of only nineteen days, Mirabelli was released.

Mirabelli's mediumistic career began at this point and very quickly flourished. In response to a rapidly proliferating array of astounding reports, local newspapers began taking sides in the case, some (not surprisingly) accusing Mirabelli of outright fraud and others taking a more sympathetic view of the matter. But of course accusations of fraud come with the territory, and Mirabelli had many credible supporters. Indeed, as Dingwall observed, Mirabelli's "friends and supporters included many from the best strata of S. Paulo society. Engineers, chemists, mathematicians, medical men, politicians, members of the various Faculties of Universities—all testified in his favour and recounted the marvels that they had witnessed in his presence" (Dingwall 1930:297).

Because Mirabelli's feats were so astonishing, eventually a 20-person committee was established to adjudicate the case. The committee concluded that a more formal investigation should be conducted by people

well-qualified to determine the authenticity of Mirabelli's phenomena. And that investigation was carried out by the Cesar Lombroso Academy of Psychological Studies, founded in 1919 for this purpose. However, according to SPR's Theodore Besterman, that Academy consisted only of Mirabelli and his wife, and thus Mirabelli was merely investigating himself (Besterman 1935). But as we will see later, Besterman may not be an entirely reliable reporter in this case. At any rate, the Academy's report was published in 1926, and it was that report which brought Mirabelli to the attention of researchers in the Northern Hemisphere.

Dingwall emphasized one very important feature of Mirabelli's manifestations, which he cautioned might well be "forgotten by those who try to belittle the claims of Mirabelli" (Besterman 1935), and which in fact were apparently forgotten later by Besterman (1935) (discussed below). That important feature is that "the greater part of the phenomena observed with Mirabelli were investigated in *broad daylight*, even the materializations, telekinesis, and levitations. When evening sittings were held, these were undertaken in a room *illuminated by powerful electric light*" (Dingwall 1930:298, emphasis in original).

I should note that Mirabelli also practiced healing, and that his automatisms extended beyond writing to painting and musical performances. According to Playfair,

... he could paint in a number of different styles, produce portraits of dead people which were identified by surviving relatives (fifty paintings of his were once exhibited in Amsterdam), and also conjure musical phenomena out of thin air. Witnesses recall having heard ethereal concerts in his presence, ranging from snatches of opera to military fanfares, while the musically untrained Mirabelli (who was untrained in practically everything else as well, come to that), would sing lengthy arias in a number of languages, often while doing something else at the same time, like writing or painting. (Playfair 2011:31)

The phenomena observed during the Academy's investigation were divided into three categories: (1) automatic writing in 28 different languages including some dialects, as well as 3 dead languages (Latin, Chaldaic, and Hieroglyphic); (2) spoken mediumship in 26 languages including 7 dialects; and (3) physical phenomena including "levitation and invisible transportation of objects: the dematerialization of organic and inorganic bodies: luminous appearances and a variety of rapping and other sounds: touches: digital and other impressions upon soft substances, and finally the materialization of complete human beings with perfect anatomical features" (Playfair 2011).

Mirabelli's linguistic productions, on "a wide range of subjects from medicine, law, sociology, to astronomy, musical science, and literature" (Dingwall 1930:304), are remarkable because, as Playfair noted, "All witnesses I have interviewed agree without hesitation that Mirabelli could not even speak either of his own languages (Italian and Portuguese) correctly" (Playfair 2011:32–33).

The automatic writing was also remarkable for its diversity, quantity, and speed. According to Dingwall,

we find [mediumistic control] Johann Huss impressing Mirabelli to write a treatise of 9 pages on "the independence of Checho-slovakia" in 20 minutes; Flammarion inspiring him to write about the inhabited planets, 14 pages in 19 minutes, in French; Muri Ka Ksi leading him to treat the Russian–Japanese war in Japanese, in 12 minutes to the extent of 5 pages; Moses is his control for a four-page dissertation entitled "The Slandering" (die Verleumdung), written in Hebrew; Harun el Raschid makes him write 15 pages in Syrian: "Allah and his Prophets," which required 22 minutes and thus down the list, his most extensive work mentioned being 40 pages written in Italian about "Loving your Neighbor" in 90 minutes, and the most odd feature mentioned is an untranslatable [sic] writing of three pages in hieroglyphics which took 32 minutes. (Dingwall 1930:304)

Altogether the Academy reported 392 sittings. They were held at 22 different locations, the majority of them (349) in the facilities of the Academy. Of these 392 sittings, 189 were for spoken mediumship (apparently all positive), 93 for automatic writing (of which 8 were negative), and 110 for physical phenomena (47 of which were negative). So 63 sessions were positive for physical phenomena. And of those, 40 were held in broad daylight and 23 at evening or at night but in bright artificial light. Moreover, in those sessions Mirabelli was clearly visible to witnesses, often sitting tied up in his chair, and in rooms searched before and after. Nevertheless, witnesses reported many occurrences which would seem to be impossible to produce fraudulently under those conditions.

For example, an armchair, with Mirabelli seated in it and his legs under control, rose two meters above the floor, remained aloft for two minutes, and then descended 2.5 meters away from its original place.

On another occasion, a skull rose into the air and began accumulating bones until it became a complete skeleton. Observers handled the skeleton for a while until it began to fade away, leaving the skull to remain floating. Soon thereafter, the skull fell onto the table. Mirabelli was bound throughout the event, which lasted 22 minutes in bright daylight. One of the sitters confessed later that when the skull initially rose into the air, he had mentally asked whether the rest of the skeleton would appear.

The Academy's report also cites a materialization occurring in a room of about 1,000 square meters, with stone walls and locked doors. Three knocks were heard, and then a child's voice called "Papa." One of the investigators said that he recognized the voice of his recently deceased daughter, and then a materialization began to take shape. It was of a young girl, wearing (according to the investigator) the dress in which she had been buried. The weeping investigator embraced the phantom, and a doctor who was there felt her pulse while the figure answered questions 'tonelessly but sensibly' (Inglis 1984:224). The investigators photographed the figure and eventually published it in their report. After that the phantom floated into the air and then, thirty minutes later, dematerialized. All ten investigators testified to what had occurred.

Another materialization is so astounding that Dingwall's description deserves to be quoted in its entirety.

Phenomena began by an odor of roses which filled the room, and after a few minutes a vague cloudy appearance was remarked forming over an arm-chair. All eyes were rivetted upon this manifestation and the sitters observed the cloud becoming thicker and forming little puffs of cloudy vapour. Then the cloud seemed to divide and move towards the sitters floating over them and condensing while at the same time it revolved and shone with a yellowish golden sheen. Then a part divided and from the opening was seen to emerge the smiling form of the prelate, Bishop Camargo Barros, who had been drowned in a shipwreck. He was wearing his biretta and insignia of office and when he descended to earth he was minutely examined by a medical man. His respiration was verified and the saliva in his mouth examined: even the inner rumblings of the stomach were duly heard and noted. Other sitters also examined the figure and fully satisfied themselves that they were not the victims of illusion or disordered imagination. The Bishop then addressed them and told them to watch carefully the mode of his disappearance. The phantom then approached the medium who was lying in his chair in a deep trance, and bent over him. Suddenly the body of the phantom appeared to be convulsed in a strange manner and then began to shrink and seemingly to wither away. The medium, controlled by the sitters on either side, then began to snore loudly and break into a cold sweat, whilst the apparition continued to draw together until it was apparently absorbed and finally disappeared. Then again the room was pervaded by the sweet odor of roses.³ (Dingwall 1930:299)

Yet another materialization report is likewise worth noting.

During the course of a sitting a bell which was on the table rose ringing into the air. The medium awoke from his trance and told those present to look at the figure of an old man enveloped in a white mantle. While he was speak-

ing there was suddenly a loud noise and to the amazement of the sitters they found amongst them an old man as described by the medium. Two of the sitters recognized the phantom as that of a physician recently deceased and photographs were taken while the form was examined for some fifteen minutes by two medical men who stated that it appeared to be a normal human being. After the examination was completed the figure was seen dissolving away from the feet upwards until only the upper part of the body remained floating in the air. One of the medical men who had examined the figure rushed forward exclaiming "But this is too much!" and seized the half of the body floating in front of him. Uttering a cry he sank unconscious to the ground, while what was left of the phantom disappeared instantly. The sitting was closed and the doctor carried from the room and restoratives applied. When he recovered he told the sitters that what he felt was a spongy, flaccid mass of substance and that then he experienced some kind of a shock and fell to the ground. (Dingwall 1961:81)

At another sitting conducted in good light, Mirabelli, tied to his chair with bonds sealed, disappeared from the séance room and was found later in another room, "though the seals put on his bonds were intact, as were the seals on all the doors and windows of the séance room" (Inglis 1984:226). Moreover, the bonds remained in the room from which Mirabelli disappeared. They simply fell to the floor after Mirabelli disappeared.

Perhaps the most famous of Mirabelli's disappearances was his apparent spontaneous transportation from São Paulo's Luz train station to São Vicente, about 50 miles away. According to witnesses, he simply vanished from the platform, where he had been standing among friends. After about 15 minutes, those concerned friends got through by telephone to the home where they had all been heading, and were told that Mirabelli had been there for the past 15 minutes (mentioned several times in de Goes 1937, and also Dingwall 1930, Inglis 1984, and Playfair 2011).

Mirabelli was a polarizing figure for Brazilian Spiritism, especially because he was somewhat flamboyant, self-aggrandizing, and accepted substantial fees for his services. It's worth noting, then, that some of the testimony in Mirabelli's favor was provided by witnesses predisposed against the medium. Perhaps the most important account is that of Carlos Imbassahy, a highly respected figure in the orthodox Brazilian Spiritist community, and the author of the 528-page *O Espiritismo à Luz dos Fatos* (Spiritism in the Light of Facts), a history of psi phenomena (Imbassahy 1935). Imbassahy was clearly not an admirer of Mirabelli. He considered the medium to be "either a vulgar fraud, a skilful [sic] conjuror, or at most a medium who had got mixed up in the wrong company, both incarnate and discarnate" (Playfair 2011:47).

Imbassahy was at home one day with a businessman friend, Daniel de

Brito, when another friend arrived along with Mirabelli. Imbassahy reports that there was nobody he less wanted to see than Mirabelli. Characteristically, the medium made himself comfortable and started speaking in “detestable Italian mixed with Portuguese and Spanish words” (quoted in Playfair 2011:47, from Imbassahy 1935), purportedly from Cesare Lombroso. After that, he turned to de Brito and “proceeded to give the startled businessman an account of his life from the cradle onwards. Brito had never met him before, and was not a well-known figure himself, but the medium seemed to know all there was to know about him. Imbassahy was reluctantly impressed” (Playfair 2011:47).

Then, when Mirabelli learned that someone in Imbassahy’s house was ill, he asked for some bottles of water, which a maid promptly brought and placed on a table four or five meters away from the medium. Mirabelli often would “magnetize” water as part of a ritual for his many efforts at mediumistic healing. The four men joined hands to form a “current”; light in the room was provided by two 100-watt bulbs; only the maid touched the bottles; Mirabelli had no time to prepare a trick; and his hands were held during the phenomena that followed. Imbassahy reports:

Immediately, in full view of us all, one of the bottles rose half way up the height of the others, and hit them with full force for five or ten seconds, before returning to its place. We thought they must have been cracked. This was clearly seen and heard, with no shadow of hesitation. People in the next room also heard it, and the patient became extremely alarmed! (Quoted in and translated by Playfair 2011:47)

Imbassahy reluctantly concluded that Mirabelli had genuine mediumistic gifts, although he continued to disapprove of him personally.

When Playfair visited Brazil in 1973, he interviewed Mirabelli’s son Regene, ‘a businessman and accomplished amateur hypnotist with a keen interest in the scientific rather than the spiritual side of psychical research’ (Playfair 2011:33). Playfair recorded some of Regene’s fascinating recollections.

I was sitting on the arm of a heavy renaissance-style sofa. Father liked me to stroke his hair, and I was doing this when the sofa simply began to move, with both of us sitting on it. Then I clearly saw the shadow of a figure on the floor in front of us; there was sunlight coming through a heavy glass window beside the sofa. Then the door of the cupboard across the room opened and a quill pen came out and was shot into the wooden floor like an arrow.

That incident sent Regene rushing from the room in terror, screaming for his mother. But,

Out in the hallway there was a heavy brass cuspidor that had fallen over, blocking the passage. We heard loud bangs and crashes coming from a room beyond, and when I rushed in, there was Mother lying on the floor with every piece of the furniture in the room on top of her. She wasn't hurt because "they" had the consideration to place a thick mattress over her first! (Playfair 2011:33)

On another occasion Regene and the rest of the family joined a dozen friends for a session to help a bedridden invalid in another room. Regene reports:

Father told us all to form a current, and he said not to worry about any phenomena that might happen. I was sitting about two meters from a table where there were three bottles of water, corked. This was to be "fluidized" and used to treat the sick man. We all sat there, and suddenly the bottles rose into the air, about thirty centimeters, and we heard three clinks as each struck the other. Then the bottles slowly began to turn over in mid-air, and stayed like that, upside down for a moment or two. I could see them very clearly, and the water inside them seemed to have gone solid, for it stayed in position, with a gap just under the cork. Then all the bottles fell hard onto the table and rolled about, although they did not break. (Playfair 2011:33–34)

It's also worth mentioning that investigators often closely monitored Mirabelli's physical condition during his various manifestations. Dingwall summarized their observations.

[Mirabelli's] temperature, it was found, varied from 36.2 to 40.2: the pulse rate from 48 to 155; and the respiration was extremely various, sometimes being fast and stertorous and at others short and almost imperceptible. At times the body became rigid with cold sweats and abundant salivation was remarked, whilst occasionally there was general muscular contraction with tremors, glassy eyes and contracted pupils. (Dingwall 1930:298)

European and American Investigations

Eventually, news about Mirabelli began to spread more widely beyond the borders of Brazil, and at that point veteran American and European researchers began taking an active interest in the case. In August 1928 philosopher and SPR president (1926–1927) Hans Driesch sat with Mirabelli, and later wrote a letter recounting his experiences (Driesch 1930).

Driesch was clearly unimpressed with the linguistic productions he observed. Mirabelli spoke Italian (in which Driesch was fluent) as if the medium's father were speaking through him. But Driesch wrote: "There was not the slightest idea of a 'trance' and I believe the whole affair was

not at all genuine, but a comedy” (Driesch 1930). Later, Mirabelli seemed to speak Estonian to a young Estonian girl he had brought with him, but Driesch could not believe that the girl’s father was really speaking through the medium. He assumed instead that Mirabelli had probably learned some Estonian.

However, Driesch was somewhat more sympathetic regarding Mirabelli’s physical phenomena. As the company entered the hostess’s dressing room, “Mirabelli cried and said some prayers and then, suddenly, a small vase on one of the tables began to move and finally fell down. I could not observe any sort of mechanical arrangement such as a wire or string or otherwise” (Driesch 1930).

Driesch was highly suspicious of several apports that occurred on this occasion, especially since Mirabelli wore a large overcoat “with enormous pockets” (Driesch 1930). But there was more. For example, Driesch, Mirabelli, and their hostess stood on a veranda whose windows were closed (and therefore on which there was no wind), and other members of the company stood inside the adjacent drawing room. Mirabelli began to pray for a sign, and then the open folding doors between the veranda and drawing room slowly closed. “This was seen at the same time by the persons in the drawing room and those on the veranda. It was rather impressive, and no mechanical arrangements could be found” (Driesch 1930). But Driesch added, cautiously, “Mirabelli had been in Pritze’s villa already about an hour before we arrived, alone with Frau Pritze. He *may* have made some arrangement before we came—I do not say that he did” (Driesch 1930).

In January, 1934, SPR member May Walker had sittings with Mirabelli and published a short and favorable report soon after (Walker 1934). For the first sitting,

There were four phenomena in all, witnessed in good white light sufficient to see each person clearly and also all the objects in the room. My camera, with which I had just taken a photograph of the medium, was lying on a long wooden table at some distance from where we were standing holding Mirabelli’s hands. It began to move about on the table and jumped on to the floor. A small fan laid on my upturned palms, began to wriggle about as if alive, then falling off. In this case, Mirabelli’s fingers were near my hands but not touching them and it almost seemed as if some magnetism issued from his fingers, causing the fan to move.

My hat, a large straw one, turned completely round on the table and three tall glass bottles filled with water all shook together. Later one of them fell over on its side. There was an interval of some minutes between each phenomenon. (Walker 1934:75–76)

The second sitting took place in a private garden, “owing to the fact that so many things in the house had been broken by psychic means” (Walker 1934:76). It was held in the evening, “well lit by electric lamps” (Walker 1934), and most of the phenomena were apports, which Walker found moderately persuasive. However, she wisely preferred indoor phenomena, and the next evening her wish was granted.

The third sitting began with some object movements and an apport, the authenticity of which Walker was not prepared to endorse. But, she said,

Of the last phenomena, however, I had no doubts. All of us adjourned to the back room, where, on a table against the far wall, were about a dozen large wine bottles filled with water.

We formed a chain in a semi-circle at the other side of the room, Mirabelli being at one end of it, but a considerable distance from the table. He asked for a sign that the water had been magnetized—which I understand he thinks is done by his father, who has passed over.

Immediately came the jingling together of the bottles;—then a loud noise which shook them still more, as if some one has rapped on the table. After a slight pause, one bottle fell over on its side. (Walker 1934:77)

Regrettably, Walker doesn’t indicate why she was certain that Mirabelli hadn’t prepared the bottles somehow in advance. In any case, she concluded that Mirabelli had presented her with “the best telekinesis I have ever seen” (Walker 1934:78).

Later the same year (in August), SPR’s Theodore Besterman visited Mirabelli. By this time Besterman had already established himself as critically cautious but open-minded with regard to at least moderate-scale demonstrations of physical mediumship. For example, his often-cited study of slate-writing showed that under certain (rather poor) *séance* conditions and for certain kinds of small-scale ostensibly paranormal phenomena, subjects can err in their observations and sometimes report events that never occurred (Besterman 1932b). But Besterman was also prepared to endorse the carefully obtained evidence for Rudi Schneider’s ability to deflect an infrared beam at a distance (Besterman 1932a).

However, when it came to Mirabelli, it seems that something simply rubbed Besterman the wrong way, right from the start. In fact, it may be that he was predisposed to distrust Mirabelli, because four years earlier he had skeptically reviewed the published accounts that were available at the time (Besterman 1930).

At any rate, during his visit to Brazil, Eurico de Goes, “one of Brazil’s first serious psychological researchers” (Playfair 2011:24), took minutes of the several sessions (at least 5) that Besterman attended. According to those minutes,

flowers materialized, bottles on a table jumped around, one even hopping onto the floor, a picture left the wall to float in mid-air and land abruptly on someone's head, a chair slid along the floor for about ten feet, the front-door key drifted out of its lock, and Mirabelli came up with a learned written discourse in French, writing nearly 1800 words in 53 minutes. (Playfair 2011:27)

Initially at least, Besterman seemed to be impressed. At least that's how he presented himself to his Brazilian hosts. de Goes quoted him in English as having written "Mr Mirabelli's phenomena [are] of the greatest interest. . . . Many of them were unique of their kind" (Playfair 2011). Notice that this quote does not endorse the phenomena as authentic, and it does not contradict his earlier skeptical review of the published accounts of Mirabelli. So it's not really surprising that by the time Besterman wrote his 1934 report for the *SPR Journal*, he showed little if any enthusiasm for what he'd observed in Brazil. Indeed, in his often sarcastic and condescending report he accused Mirabelli of fraud and provided some examples of phenomena he believed to have been faked.

Significantly, in Besterman's sessions, Mirabelli didn't allow the sorts of controls reported in some of the most striking cases mentioned earlier—for example, binding Mirabelli to an armchair and sealing the bonds. Besterman reported that it was clear he was allowed to be no more than a spectator, and he remarked, "No sort of control was at any time exercised, suggested or asked for by any sitter other than myself, and then without success" (Besterman 1935:144). Séances were held in the evening, with illumination varying from complete darkness to bright electric light from seven or eight uncovered bulbs.

The largest group of phenomena witnessed by Besterman were apports, which Besterman claimed "were undoubtedly all faked" (Besterman 1935:145) and facilitated by obvious methods of distraction and occasionally by darkness as well. Besterman also reported moving bottles of "magnetized" water, similar to what Walker had reported months earlier. However, in Besterman's case, the phenomenon occurred in darkness. Not surprisingly, Besterman conjectured that Mirabelli looped a black thread around the moved bottle (rather than attaching it to the bottle) so that it could be easily retrieved.

After briefly mentioning and dismissing some other minor physical phenomena, Besterman then reported two other examples in detail. The first does, indeed, seem to have been a simple conjuring trick, as Besterman noted. Besterman described the performance as follows:

[Mirabelli] went into another room accompanied by [one of the sitters], there, we were told, [he] held the coin in his open palm, with the sitter's open palm over it. The coin then vanished, Mirabelli returned to the room in which we were sitting, and asked me where I wanted the coin re-materialised. I elected for my own pocket and in a moment or two Mirabelli announced that the coin had been precipitated into my breast-pocket; there I duly found it. This performance was repeated with each of the male sitters present, with success, except that on one occasion I ventured correctly to forecast to my neighbour where the coin would be found. It must be noted that at no time during the progress of this phenomenon did Mirabelli approach within three yards of the main body of sitters.

As Besterman correctly observed,

The way this trick was done was simple in the extreme. At a given moment, before the lecture, Mirabelli asked the male sitters one by one into an adjoining room, where he examined them "magnetically," making passes over them, etc. While doing so he slipped a coin into the pocket of each "patient." The vanishing of the coin is of course elementary palming, and the rest is obvious. All that is required is unlimited impudence and a sufficient number of similar coins. What first aroused my suspicion was this: when asked to examine the 1869 coin I *did* examine it and made a mental note of its characteristics. When I found the coin in my breast-pocket I immediately saw, from minute characteristic marks, that it was not the same one, and the rest was then obvious. Again, every coin was found in an outside breast-pocket except X's, who had his materialised into his hip pocket, and X had been the only "patient" who had been asked to take his jacket off, as I happened by chance to notice. (Besterman 1935:148)

Besterman claimed that only one phenomenon during his sittings was "really impressive." This was the turning of a blackboard placed on the top of a bottle, occurring in bright light sufficient for filming the event, and with the medium and sitters holding their hands over the board. This occurred twice, and Besterman was unable to duplicate the effect by blowing on the board. He was also certain that no threads were used. He wrote:

I am still puzzled by this phenomenon; taking into account the good light, the fact that Mirabelli performs the phenomenon completely surrounded by standing "sitters," who seem to have complete liberty of movement, and the fact that he expressed no objection whatever to the filming, although I strongly emphasised the fact that the camera and the film were very special ones and would show every detail, the fact that Mirabelli allowed me on each occasion to arrange the *mise en scène* and did not precipitate himself on the board as it fell, the fact that the room, the table, and the bottle were all different, though the board was the same, all these circumstances make

the hypothesis of threads practically impossible, while any other fraudulent method is difficult to conceive. (Besterman 1938:148)

Besterman's report elicited a sharply critical response from Dingwall (Dingwall 1936), claiming that Besterman was merely "bringing back stories of silly tricks" (Dingwall 1936:169). His remarks criticized not only Besterman's negative appraisal of Mirabelli, but his positive views as well, and are worth excerpting.

Mr Besterman has come to a surprising conclusion. He thinks that there is a *prima facie* case that Mirabelli may possess some paranormal "faculty," and this is based on the fact he was unable to detect the *modus operandi* of a revolving blackboard effect. Apart from the fact that there was no reason why he should have been able to understand it, are we expected to believe . . . that because . . . [Mr Besterman] could not and cannot discover how certain conjuring tricks are done there is a *prima facie* case for the successful performers possessing "paranormal" faculties? It is this that makes psychical research ridiculous, and rightly so.

In my account of Mirabelli, which was printed in 1930 by the A.S.P.R., I described certain phenomena and named the parties who were said to have been present. . . . Did Mr Besterman interview any one of these persons? Did he talk to any of the sitters who are recorded as being present at the alleged materializations of Bishop Barros, Prof. Ferreira, or Dr de Souza's daughter? To say that their testimony "is of relatively little value" is beside the point. It is as valuable as that of Mr Besterman, since what they record is quite as striking as anything with D. D. Home. Do these witnesses exist? Were they present at these sittings? Were they lying or are they made to record phenomena which never took place at all? Or must we admit that certain "*events took place which were described by those who witnessed them in the terms we have read?*" What were those events?" I wrote these words in 1930. No answer has been attempted. Yet in 1934, at heavy cost to the S.P.R., Mr Besterman goes to South America ostensibly to inquire into what he terms Mirabelli's "astounding feats" and comes back with tales of revolving objects which puzzled him.

The problem of Mirabelli is the same as that of Home. In the latter case the witnesses are dead and cannot now be interviewed: in the former case they are living and can be seen and cross-examined. Signed statements by Dr G. de Souza, Dr Moura, or Dr Mendonça describing in their own words what they saw on certain occasions as recorded in *O Medium Mirabelli* would be worth far more than stories of revolving blackboards and jumping cameras which puzzled observers who would be equally puzzled by 90% of conjuring tricks performed by even moderately skilled artistes. (Dingwall 1936:169–170)

To this, Besterman responded simply that Dingwall's criticisms called

“for little comment” (Besterman 1936:236). But Dingwall was justified in complaining that Besterman made no effort to follow up on the most intriguing eyewitness reports of dramatic phenomena under good controls. Fortunately, but much later, Playfair was able to interview some of the surviving sitters at Mirabelli’s séances, and that material informs his detailed account (Playfair 2011). Playfair also generously concedes: “It must be said that little useful research can be done in two or three weeks in Brazil even today, and even when one speaks Portuguese, as I do and he did not” (Playfair 2011:44).

So readers should keep in mind that Besterman claimed never to have observed the most dramatic phenomena on which Mirabelli’s fame largely rests, and it should be mentioned again that he never observed the medium submitting to the seemingly good controls so often reported by others during those events. This is somewhat reminiscent of a feature of the case of Eusapia Palladino, whose most impressive phenomena often occurred under the most stringent controls (see for example Feilding 1963, Feilding, Baggally, & Carrington 1909), and who had few if any reservations about cheating when conditions were looser, or when she disliked her investigators, or when she was lazy, or when the “force” was weak (see the discussion of Palladino in Braude 1997).

However, as Playfair noted, Besterman may indeed have witnessed something more spectacular and less amenable to charges of chicanery. He may have intentionally failed to report an apparently impressive materialization. This was evidently not a full-figure materialization, but rather “radiations . . . on a corner of the table” (de Goes 1937:125). Playfair reports:

At the very first meeting, according to the minutes [of the séances], Mirabelli announced that he could see an entity named Zabelle, whom he described in detail. Besterman said he had known a lady of that name in London who was now dead, and when he asked for a sign of her presence, bottles began to jump around on a table, one of them even falling on to the floor at his request. Besterman mentions the bottles, but not the mysterious Zabelle.

At the second meeting, Zabelle again dropped in and became visible enough for Dr Thadeu de Medeiros to take a photograph of her. This is reproduced in de Goes’s book, and is one of the more credible materialization photographs I have seen. . . . According to the minutes, which de Goes reports Besterman as having signed, Zabelle performed a number of feats to prove her presence.

In the minutes of the third meeting, we are told that Besterman examined the photograph of Zabelle and declared that there was a strong resemblance to the lady he had known. The face on the photograph is extremely clear, more so than in most pictures of this kind. [See Figure 2]



Figure 2. Apparent materialization of Zabelle.

Besterman's failure to mention these incidents is certainly surprising. de Goes's minutes claim that at the first of the three meetings "Besterman . . . confessed that he had never seen anything so interesting" (de Goes 1937:105). Playfair correctly observes,

It is surprising that Besterman makes no mention of this episode. It is clear from his lengthy published report that he was anxious to miss no opportunity to discredit Mirabelli's powers, and if the Zabelle story were untrue, here was an excellent opportunity to do so.

If, on the other hand, it was true, then Besterman is guilty of suppressing strong evidence in favour of the medium. (Playfair 2011:45)

The Phantom Ladder

However, if one wants to find evidence of Mirabelli cheating in connection with his more spectacular manifestations, one need only consider the famous (or at least notorious) photograph of Mirabelli allegedly levitating (see Figure 3a and 3b). This photo was published outside of Brazil for the first time in the first (1975) edition of Playfair's *The Flying Cow*. And in that book Playfair noted that he was unable to authenticate the photo, and that it might be faked.

Confirmation came in 1990, when American researcher Gordon Stein found an original print of the photo in the SPR archives in the Cambridge University Library, showing clearly that the image had been retouched to remove the ladder upon which Mirabelli was standing. It's unclear whether the original negative had been retouched, or whether a print was manipulated and then re-photographed. But in any case, the damning evidence is clear (see Figure 4), and Stein was undoubtedly justified in claiming that Mirabelli "knowingly passed off a fraudulent photo of himself as genuine"

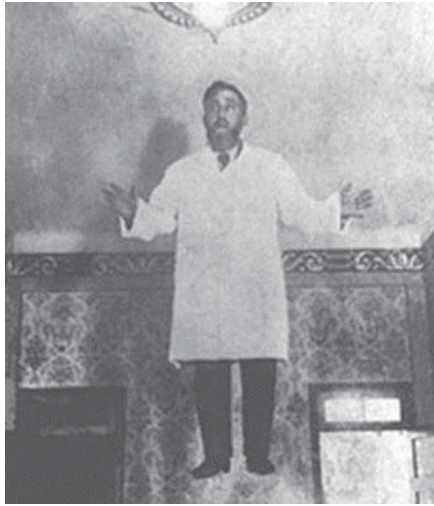


Figure 3a. Mirabelli apparently levitating.

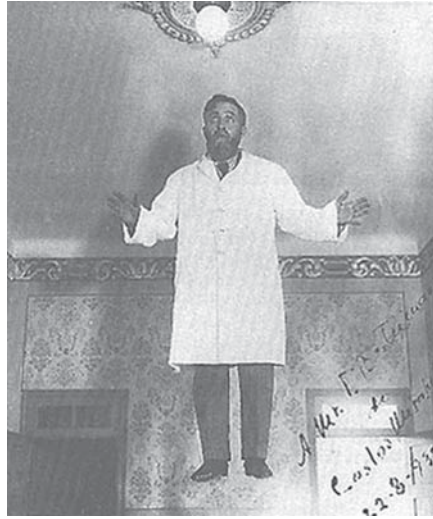


Figure 3b. Phantom ladder photo inscribed to Besterman.



Figure 4. The signs of retouching the photo to hide the ladder.⁴

(Stein 1991). Curiously, Mirabelli had signed the print and inscribed it “To Mr Theodore Besterman.” And equally curiously, Besterman—clearly no fan of Mirabelli—failed to seize the opportunity to mention the obvious fraud in his report. At any rate, Playfair was also quick to publish a paper discussing the discovered fraud, and he updated the account of Mirabelli in a later edition of his book (Playfair 1992, 2011).

Conclusion

Obviously, the case of Mirabelli must be regarded, *at best*, as one of so-called “mixed mediumship”—that is combining fraudulent with genuine phenomena. Equally obviously, and as the case of Palladino illustrates clearly, one can’t plausibly argue that a person who cheats once will cheat all the time. Indeed, as noted above, there can be obvious (and perhaps even defensible) reasons for a medium cheating occasionally. In fact, an irony of the Palladino case is that her willingness to cheat when allowed set the stage for the most convincing and stringently controlled *séances* in her career—the 1908 Naples sittings (Feilding 1963, Feilding, Baggally, & Carrington 1909).⁵

But assuming that Mirabelli wasn’t fully, exclusively, and honorably devoted to promoting Spiritism, what might his reasons have been to cheat? The most obvious candidates would be money and fame. Now there’s nothing inherently scandalous in someone suitably psychically gifted wanting to make mediumship a primary source of income. However, perhaps there’s more to the story than that. By all accounts, Mirabelli was not averse to liberal self-promotion; Playfair describes him as flamboyant and vain. He also claims that Mirabelli ‘was a big spender, who would think nothing of buying ten suits or a dozen pairs of shoes at a time, only to give most of them away’ (Playfair 2011:26). Clearly, that’s a lifestyle that somehow needs to be funded.

Besterman’s spin on Mirabelli’s fiscal profile is somewhat less neutral. He wrote:

Though he is anxious not to be considered as a professional, in fact he is. Directly or indirectly Mirabelli demands and obtains (as I know only too well) substantial fees, far more substantial, indeed, than any ever asked of me before when attending sittings on a medium’s own premises. The procedure is this: Mirabelli founds or causes to be founded an institute, for which he works, on the premises of which he lives, and to which sitters make payment. It was in this way that the Academia de Estudos Psychicos “Cesar Lombroso” was founded at São Paulo in September 1919; and Mirabelli’s move to Rio de Janeiro led to the foundation there, in November 1933, of the Institute Psiquico Brasileiro. (Besterman 1935:142)

So if we’re to assume that Mirabelli was nothing but a cheat, and that he cheated not only to live comfortably, but to live lavishly as well, how do we account for the reports of his most compelling manifestations, and his materializations in particular? Skeptics might initially appeal to the usual suspects, malobservation, naivete, and collusion among witnesses. But that would seem to require an implausibly large number of gullible, incompe-

tent, or corrupt people, whose otherwise primary disqualification as witnesses is that they weren't fortunate enough to be SPR insiders. Mirabelli's manifestations were observed by more than five hundred people (more than one hundred of them foreigners), often supported by photographs, and as mentioned earlier the phenomena were typically produced in bright light and often under decent controls.

Nevertheless, Besterman condescendingly impugned the competence of the many witnesses who testified to Mirabelli's most dramatic manifestations. He wrote:

... their testimony is of relatively little value. These gentlemen have in most cases had no experience with mediums other than Mirabelli, and they have no notion of the conditions under which psychical research should be conducted. Their testimony, in short, has such value as can be given to evidence put forward by inexperienced and more or less casual visitors, concerning events over which they have no control. (Besterman 1935:143)

However, it's Besterman whose claims appear to be worthless. For one thing, many of Mirabelli's impressive and well-documented phenomena evidently did in fact occur under good controls, including (as we've seen) bright light, sealed binding of the medium to his chair, and holding a materialized phantom as it melted in the observer's grasp. Moreover, in many cases, knowing how to control or properly observe such large-scale manifestations, often in locations at which Mirabelli had no opportunity to prepare a trick, doesn't require a rich prior history of mediumistic investigation. Besides, the phenomena continued for many years. Members of Mirabelli's regular investigations probably learned from experience and became more careful and shrewd with time. Revealingly, Besterman admitted in a footnote to the passage quoted above, that his judgment was based, not on any attempt to meet with and query those whose reports he was impugning, but rather on his very limited experiences with Mirabelli, which (we've noted) were not controlled.

At least Besterman didn't resort to the famously lame hypotheses of collective hypnosis or collective hallucination. I've dealt in detail elsewhere with these last-ditch maneuvers (Braude 1997, 2007), and so I'll just mention a few salient points here. First, regarding hypnosis: There simply is no evidence that the appropriate kind of mass hypnosis has ever occurred—that is, inducing people to issue the same or concordant observational reports in conditions widely recognized as being unfavorable to hypnosis, and (even more important) despite the well-known and great variability in human hypnotic susceptibility. Actually, if a medium could, through suggestion, get different people, of different degrees of hypnotizability, simultaneously to

experience and report the same phenomena, and also do this under conditions unfavorable to suggestion, that ability would arguably be as paranormal as what it's supposed to explain away. In fact, it looks suspiciously like telepathic influence.

The second hypothesis, of collective hallucination, is simply ridiculous. It can't even remotely account for Mirabelli's continued success under good conditions, and often for many years. Since Mirabelli's witnesses weren't engaged in something like mushroom rituals, there would have to be a lot of spontaneous hallucinating going on, over decades, remarkably resulting in people having the same or similar non-veridical experiences. Besides, this hypothesis fails to account for the causal relevance of Mirabelli's presence. If the medium had nothing to do with witnesses' allegedly false observational reports, why were they hallucinating in the first place? But if Mirabelli was responsible, then (since he presumably wasn't dispensing hallucinogens) it looks like this hypothesis is really just one of collective hypnosis, the inadequacy of which we've just noted.

But can the materializations at least be explained away satisfactorily by positing an array of confederates posing as the deceased? Dingwall disposed of that conjecture:

I will even grant the possibility of wholesale confederacy and assume (for the sake of argument) that the materializations are confederates of the medium or of the sitters. But confederates are human beings and human beings do not usually rise into the air, dissolve into pieces and float about in clouds of vapor. Confederates do not lose half their bodies, feel like flaccid sponges and give violent shocks to people who try to seize them. (Dingwall 1930:301–302)

It's also worth noting that Mirabelli's reported phenomena are not particularly outlandish when compared to lesser materialization phenomena for which there exists good evidence (see, e.g., Braude 1997, Inglis 1977, Weaver 2015). Some are simply more complete, complex, or virtuosic. Besides, in the absence of any kind of credible scale for determining degrees of strangeness, and in view of the abundance of decent evidence for partial materializations (including evidence from the cases of Home and Palladino), we would do well to heed Richet's warning that

it is as difficult to understand the materialization of a living hand, warm, articulated, and mobile, or even of a single finger, as to understand the materialization of an entire personality which comes and goes, speaks, and moves the veil that covers him. (Richet 1923/1975:491)

The fact remains that many of Mirabelli's apparently well-attested and decently controlled manifestations resist easy—or any—plausible skeptical dismissal. Certainly, Besterman's exposure of and conjectures about conjuring tricks under no controls fails to address the challenge posed by the much more spectacular and controlled physical phenomena reported in Mirabelli's case. So although Mirabelli's manifestations are perhaps not as well-established as, say, the best of D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino, Kluski, and others, good reasons remain for taking the case seriously, and perhaps for regarding it as indicating just how dramatic PK phenomena can be.⁶

Notes

- ¹ Mirabelli changed his name when he was young, concerned over the similarity between his name and the woman's name Carmen.
- ² Moreover, because most of the primary material in this case is written in Portuguese, which I do not know (but for which online translation programs provided some help), this report inevitably focuses on the accounts written in English.
- ³ See Figure 1 for a photo of a materialized poet.
- ⁴ I found this image in an online search. Evidently it was taken from a BBC program covering the case of Mirabelli, but apart from that I don't know its origin. I should mention that I have a print of the ostensible levitation, and I've seen many others. In all of those, the retouching is not so obvious. Nevertheless, all the prints I've seen show a noticeable difference in clarity between the wallpaper behind Mirabelli's torso and that behind his feet. This can be seen in Figure 3a and 3b.
- ⁵ This series of sittings was criticized toothlessly—in fact, absurdly—by Richard Wiseman. For an analysis of his critique, see Braude 1997:Chapter 2.
- ⁶ I'm very grateful to Carlos Alvarado, Leslie Kean, Michael Nahm, and Guy Playfair for helpful comments on several ancestors of this paper.

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