

Ernesto Bozzano's 'Phénomènes Psychiques au Moment de la Mort' (Psychic Phenomena at the Moment of Death)

Early description of deathbed psychic phenomena published in 1923 by Ernesto Bozzano, a prominent Italian researcher. This article cites some of the experiences it contains, and describes Bozzano's ideas.

Contents

One of the most interesting of the early books devoted to psychic phenomena related to death is *Phénomènes Psychiques au Moment de la Mort* (Psychic Phenomena at the Moment of Death).¹ Authored by Italian psychologist and psychical researcher [Ernesto Bozzano](#) (1862–1943), the book was published in 1923, and included three previously published studies of specific phenomena. In these studies Bozzano presented many cases drawn from published sources, mainly spiritualist/spiritist and psychical research literature, and categorized the cases.

The first category was 'apparitions of the deceased in deathbeds' which included cases of [deathbed visions](#), that is, visions seen by dying persons, and, in some cases, by individuals around the dying person. These cases were subcategorized:

- apparitions of persons known to be dead, seen only by the dying person
- apparitions of individuals that no one knew had died, perceived only by the dying person
- apparitions perceived both by dying person and other persons at the scene
- apparitions related to information communicated via mediums
- apparitions only seen by relatives of the dying person
- apparitions seen after the death close to the body

One case in the first group concerned the death of a man called Lloyd Ellis, and included, in addition to the vision, a prediction of time of death. It is cited here from the original source in English:

Lying in an apparent sleep one night ... he woke up suddenly and asked his mother – 'Where is my father?' She answered him, tearfully, 'Lloyd dear, you know your dear father is dead. He has been dead for more than a year now.' 'Is he?' he asked, incredulously. 'Why! he was in the room just now, and I have an appointment with him, three o'clock next Wednesday.' And Lloyd Ellis died at three o'clock on the following Wednesday morning.²

Several of the cases presented have veridical aspects, that is, they included information that could be verified, for instance, the dying individual saw someone

he or she did not know had died. The following, cited by Bozzano, is taken from the original English-language source in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*. A lady named Harriet H Ogle wrote as follows:

Manchester, November 9th, 1884.

My brother, John Alkin Ogle, died at Leeds, July 17th, 1879. About an hour before he expired he saw his brother, who had died about 16 years before, and looking up with fixed interest, said, 'Joe! Joe!' and immediately after exclaimed with ardent surprise, 'George Hanley!' My mother, who had come from Melbourne, a distance of about 40 miles, where George Hanley resided, was astonished at this, and said, 'How strange he should see George Hanley. He died only 10 days ago!' Then, turning to my sister-in-law, asked if anybody had told John of George Hanley's death. She said, 'No one,' and my mother was the only person present who was aware of the fact. I was present and witnessed this.³

Bozzano did not think that cases of this sort could be explained via telepathy (that is, that the dying person perceived a person's death via telepathy and manifested such knowledge via a hallucination.) He believed that in certain experiences – where the involvement of a telepathic agent other than the person who had died was assumed – there was no emotional rapport between the persons concerned, which he considered a necessary prerequisite for the occurrence of telepathy. In addition, he argued that such telepathy was improbable because 'in nearly all spontaneous telepathic phenomena the *agent* transmits to the *percipient* the hallucinatory vision of their own person, and not that of another person...'⁴

Bozzano also discussed fascinating cases in which people around the dying person had experiences of their own. Among them was that of nurse Joy Snell,⁵ who wrote about her observations of spirits around the dying, and of the spirit of the dying person leaving the physical body.

In another case, a man present at the death of his wife stated that he saw apparitions around her, and also saw her 'astral body' hovering over her physical form – which Bozzano called a case of 'fluidic doubling'. One of the apparitions was of a woman wearing a crown and dressed in Greek attire, which seemed to Bozzano to be a symbolic representation, causing him to speculate about its origin. Was it an imaginal creation of the percipient or a symbolic telepathic message sent by a spirit? Such an idea was not unknown, he considered: there were cases in the psychical literature of symbolic telepathic experiences and of premonitions of possible spiritual origin.

Bozzano also presented a secondhand case narrated in the first person (taken here from the original source). Two sisters were attending the deathbed of a third sister (Charlotte), and they saw two brothers who had died a while back:

I saw a golden light above Charlotte's bed, and within the light were enfolded two Cherub's faces gazing intently upon her... I put my hand across the bed to Susanna, and I *only* said this word: 'Susanna, look up!' She did so, and at one her countenance changed. 'Oh Emmeline,' she said, 'they are William and

John.’ Then both of us watched on till all faded away like a washed-out picture; and in a few hours Charlotte died...[6](#)

Discussing hallucinations, the author wrote that ‘if the phenomena in question have as a cause the thoughts of the moribund ... the dying person ... should perceive more frequently hallucinatory forms representing living persons’.[7](#) But he stated that this was not the case. Furthermore, in most telepathic hallucinations the figure seen is that of the emitter, the agent, while in deathbed cases the figure of a third individual is perceived, in Bozzano’s view a weakness of the telepathic explanation.

The next study in the book concerned [psychokinetic](#) phenomena related to death events). Bozzano gave thirteen accounts: of falling objects (7 cases), clocks starting or stopping (3), objects that were shaken (1), objects that broke (1), and lights that turned on (1).

In Bozzano’s view, no physical explanation could account for cases in which the dying person and the physical event were distant from each other. Instead, he postulated the presence of a deceased person at the location of the physical disturbance took place, and pointed in certain cases to apparent intention on the part of this person.

Bozzano also presented a case he received secondhand from a frequent correspondent, named Vera Kunzler. The account is from the translation of the original French source cited by Bozzano:

At the beginning of the year 1917 my aunt, Madame Pauline Riesbeck, had a husband in the army, but, since he was over forty, they thought that he was in the rear line of battle, and, in consequence, she was not anxious about him. The morning of February 12th my aunt went into her room, about half-past ten, to look for something. At the exact moment when she stepped over the threshold of the door the portrait of her husband, a large one which showed him in military costume, detached itself from the wall, fell, and slid over the floor to her feet. When the nail and the cord which had held up the frame were examined, they were found to be intact...

My aunt, convinced that a misfortune had occurred, put a cross, in red, against this date on her calendar, and waited three weeks for news of her husband. Toward the beginning of March she learned that my uncle, Monsieur Adolphe Riesbeck, had died on the ‘field of honor’ (as they say) from a bullet that struck him in the head, the morning of February 12th, about half-past ten.[8](#)

The third study concerned ‘transcendental music’. One type involved music heard in the room where no source was observed, and musical instruments playing themselves. There were also instances in which mediums played musical instruments, presumably inspired by spirits. Other cases were those in which music was perceived telepathically; music in hauntings; music unrelated to death contexts; music heard in deathbeds, and music heard after a death.

In a case cited by Bozzano (taken from the original source), music was related to an apparition:

In October, 1879, I was staying at Bishopthorpe, near York, with the Archbishop of York. I was sleeping with Miss Z. T., when I suddenly saw a white figure fly through the room from the door to the window. It was only a shadowy form and passed in a moment. I felt utterly terrified, and called out at once, 'Did you see that ?' and at the same time Miss Z. T. exclaimed, 'Did you *hear* that?' Then, I said, instantly, 'I saw an angel fly through the room,' and she said, 'I heard an angel singing'.⁹

For Bozzano, such differences were due to 'two simultaneous supernormal manifestations that, due to the special idiosyncracies of the percipients, were perceived separately'.¹⁰

In his view, collective musical experiences could not be explained in terms of suggestion or hallucinations on the part of the experiencers. With regard to the idea of telepathic hallucinations, Bozzano noted many cases in which the dying person 'did not participate in the collective hearing of transcendental music, which excludes all possibility of explaining the facts assuming a hallucination having its origin in the mentality of the dying person'.¹¹

In Bozzano's view the cases presented in the book could be best explained by discarnate agency. In some instances, he noted, the percipients voiced doubts about having heard the music as soon as it stopped, at which it resumed, an apparent sign of intention to convey that a spirit was trying to communicate.

Bozzano's approach is further illustrated by this statement concluding the first study:

Let us... resign ourselves to studying for a long time the metapsychic manifestations by accumulating the facts, classifying them, comparing and analyzing them, in order to discover their relations, and to grasp the laws which govern them; in this way we will really do the work of science.¹²

Reception

The book was not discussed in the publications of the [Society for Psychical Research](#), and only received a brief note in the Italian publication *Luce e Ombra*, in which there was no attempt to evaluate the work.¹³ But it received attention in other forums.

In Germany Josef Peter stated that while many will not believe in Bozzano's ideas, others would perhaps find that the usual scientific explanations are not enough to account for the phenomena. Spirit agency, Peter believed, may end offering the best explanation.¹⁴

In France, [René Sudre](#) argued that some cases of deathbed visions could be hallucinatory. Contrary to Bozzano he believed that veridical experiences could be explained via the psychic powers of the subconscious mind of the dying person. In his view the existence of discarnate agents had not been demonstrated.¹⁵

The book was also commented on by Stanley de Brath in the *Journal of the [American Society for Psychical Research](#)*. He wrote that Bozzano had raised psychic phenomena

'to the dignity of a science... which... differs from all other sciences by the fact that it deals with "intelligent forces" and with phenomena that under several aspects transcend time and space'.[16](#)

Although the book has been cited by later students of death phenomena, it does not seem to be widely known today, particularly to English language writers discussing the topic, and the wider issue of phenomena suggestive of survival of death.[17](#)

Later Writings

Interestingly, Bozzano had a tendency to revise his monographs over the years, adding more cases to them. This was the case with the studies summarized here. They were published in later years as *Musica Trascendentale*,[18](#) *Le Visioni dei Morenti*,[19](#) and *La Psiche Domina la Materia*.[20](#)

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Bozzano, 1923.
- [2](#). Cases (1888), 359
- [3](#). Gurney & Myers (1889), 460.
- [4](#). Bozzano (1923), 51.
- [5](#). Snell (1918).
- [6](#). Gurney, Myers, and Podmore (1886), Vol. 2, 629.
- [7](#). Bozzano (1923), 109.
- [8](#). Flammarion (1922), 305.
- [9](#). Sidgwick et al. (1894), 317-18.
- [10](#). Bozzano (1923), 231.
- [11](#). Bozzano, (1923), 258-59.
- [12](#). Bozzano (1923), 112.
- [13](#). Anonymous (1924).
- [14](#). Peter (1924).
- [15](#). Sudre (1924).
- [16](#). Stanley de Brath (1925), 283.
- [17](#). E.g., Kean (2017).
- [18](#). Bozzano (1943).
- [19](#). Bozzano (1947).
- [20](#). Bozzano (1948).