

Morselli's Psicologia e Spiritismo

Enrico Morselli (1852-1929), an Italian psychiatrist, contributed to the study of the mediumship of Eusapia Palladino, notably regarding its clinical and psychological aspects. This work is contained in his 1908 two-volume book, little known to English-language writers, *Psicologia e 'Spiritismo'* (Psychology and 'Spiritism') on which this article is largely based (the original Italian edition can be read online).^[1] Morselli adopts an anti-survival stance, rejecting discarnate agency in favour of fraud, psychological processes, or psychic means involving human agency.

Psicologia e 'Spiritismo'

Morselli found spirit mediumship, much in vogue in the late nineteenth century, to be a challenging topic.^[2] He thought it had nothing to do with the spirits of deceased individuals, but rather that it was unscientific and a threat to mental health, with the potential to spread by a process of 'psychopathic contagion'.^[3] He was one of a small group of thinkers (whose work has received little attention)^[4] who believed that mediumship was primarily pathological, although in some cases (such as Palladino) it could create genuinely paranormal phenomena, such as anomalous movements of objects and acquisition of information about sitters.

Morselli found mediumship appearing at various ages, although mainly during youth; women did not display it more than men, but presented it in its highest form, hysteria being typical of females (although also found in males). He believed that there were many honest mediums, but that fraud also occurred, although an entranced medium might not necessarily be aware of what he or she was doing.

Morselli believed that a deeper study was needed that covered aspects of mediums' psychology and physiology. He criticized scientific notions of mediumship as 'generally second-hand',^[5] coming from unqualified spiritists. In his view the topic had not even been properly addressed by mediumship researchers such as [William James](#), Cesare Lombroso, [Frederic WH Myers](#), and Julian Ochorowicz. In particular, he thought that the topic of spirit communicators and controls – which, citing [Théodore Flournoy's](#) observations with [Hélène Smith](#), he saw as unconscious creations of the medium – cried out for psychological study.

Morselli saw mediumship, and the case of Palladino in particular, as an abnormal hysterical manifestation: mediums possessed an 'anomalous psychic constitution'^[6] with a tendency towards extreme changes of mood.^[7] In favorable circumstances the disintegration of the medium's consciousness produced a separation of the waking state from the subliminal content of consciousness, leading to a 'more intense and extensive automatic activity, sensory, motor and imaginative'.^[8] Mediumship, for Morselli, was 'an abnormal fact of the human physio-psychic personality which, like all other abnormalities and individual abnormalities... is directly linked to the normal somatic, physiological and mental conditions of the *Homo sapiens* animal...'^[9]

Morselli believed that mediums typically possessed a 'hysterical' temperament, pointing to a key symptom of excess of emotion. He stressed that mediums were very suggestible, and that everything they said about spirits causing their phenomena could be considered a 'product of environmental suggestion'.^[10] He also pointed to 'the ostentation of the extraordinary, the exceptional, feelings of pride, the almost irresistible need to be admired',^[11] and went on to list other manifestations he believed that mediums had in common with hysterics:

- obfuscation of consciousness
- drowsiness or lethargy
- changes in circulation and breathing
- hiccups
- yawning
- profuse perspiration
- tremors
- muscular convulsions
- contractures
- anesthesia
- pharyngeal spasms
- spasmodic laughter
- ecstatic facial expressions
- photophobia and hyperacusia (extreme sensitivity to sounds)
- erotic estrus

- passionate attitudes
- gesturing and vocal stereotypes (disturbances)...^[12]

Taking issue with those who believed that mediums were both physically and mentally healthy, Morselli pointed to mediums who appeared to suffer from nervous complaints, such as DD Home.

Séances with Palladino

Most of Morselli's book is about Palladino, whom he calls a 'modern pythoness'.^[13] This is not a scientific report, but rather a compilation of summaries and impressions of séances attended by Morselli during the 1900s, by which time she had been studied by several scientists and scholars.^[14] The séances took place at the Circolo Scientifico Minerva (Scientific Circle Minerva), in Genoa, a private group that included psychical researcher [Ernesto Bozzano](#), astronomer Francesco Porro and journalist Luigi Arnaldo Vassallo.

Morselli considered that at least three quarters of the phenomena he witnessed during six seances were genuine; the remainder he considered ambiguous (10%), fraudulent (10%), or hallucinations or illusions (5%).^[15] He classifies subjective phenomena^[16] such as changes in the state of consciousness and in the medium's physiological state (sensory and motor functions), along with

- auto-hypnosis (such as trance and catalepsy)
- susceptibility (difficult to hypnotize, openness to external suggestion)
- amnesia during trance
- vivid dreams
- mental regression (primitive, infantile, playful ideas)
- monodeism (fixed ideas)
- automatisms (sensory and motor)
- personifications (trance personalities)
- communications in languages unknown to the medium
- sensory simulation of telepathy
- clairvoyance, and telepathy (with humans and spirits)

He did not believe the medium displayed the power of clairvoyance nor telepathic communication with the deceased.

The physical phenomena he witnessed were:

- parakinesis (movement of objects with some physical contact)
- telekinesis
- changes of weight in objects or the medium
- thermal-radiant phenomena (such as breezes and cold areas)
- sounds, including voices
- hyloplastic phenomena (production of marks or tracings)
- zollnerian phenomena such as apports and knots on cords
- tangible teleplasty (materializations)
- simple telephany (luminous phenomena)
- visible, active and tangible teleplasmy (materialized forms and limbs)

In his account of the first séance, conducted in 1901, Morselli described Palladino being seated at the head of the table with a cabinet behind her back, her hands and knees controlled by two persons. He wrote:

The table was in motion: it was bowing now from one side, it went up on two feet and on one, and in the end I saw it stand up to 10-15 centimeters, remain suspended for a few seconds below the hands that protruded in the chain, and then, as if suddenly the thrust that pushed it or the strength that supported it lessened, it fell noisily on the floor.^[17]

On another occasion Morselli 'felt a pull on my chest jacket, as if there was a person standing in front of me.'^[18]

Imprints on clay from materialized forms were obtained: describing a photograph of an imprint of a fist, Morselli said it was made by 'placing the second phalange of the four fingers and the lower outer edge of the radial or thumb against the impressionable soft substance. That hand is small, and does not have morphological characters that can be recognized...'^[19]

Materialized forms were seen. A drawing shows a 'pendulum arm, like a puppet's' that disappeared into the dark cabinet.^[20] Morselli also reported the appearance of a 'black and opaque shadow having the bizarre form of a large head of a goat, whose elongated nose was going to touch the face of Mr. Schmolz [a sitter]... and gave the impression of a beard'.^[21]

One sitter saw something that seemed like a black globe; then a long dark figure appeared, seen both by Morselli and another sitter, and which, 'to be better perceived, bows forward and retires to where it came from, and disappears'.^[22]

On another occasion Morselli felt a form approach him, describing two apparently live hands that 'took and shook my head, one with the palm applied on the forehead and the other on the nape and the neck; a head approached mine; a face touched my temple; a neck and a mouth with fleshy lips and tepid breath gave me two or three kisses on my hair.'^[23] He felt the living body of a woman close to him, and heard the figure say, 'Your mother!' He ascertained that Palladino was in her chair and properly controlled. But later he expressed skepticism, noting that the form did not correspond to his mother, and that it lacked a characteristic growth on his mother's forehead.^[24]

Synchronous movements by Palladino corresponded to raps, movement of objects and other phenomena in the séance room. Other of her movements such as stretching her arms, raising the hands of the controllers, and tightening her fists, did not correspond in this way.

Like other students of Palladino, Morselli was aware of instances of fraud. For instance, he believed that she faked a luminous effect by holding a match in her fingers: it fooled other members of the circle, but he was soon convinced it was a deception caused by her dexterously striking a match.^[25]

Psychological Aspects

Morselli describes Palladino's character, behaviors, and dispositions. He reports that she was not a reliable informant: she frequently contradicted herself, and her recollections were confused regarding dates, dates and incidents. Her 'speech was truncated, rarely with complete phrases'.^[26] She was moody, often passing quickly from 'excessive happiness to a melancholic taciturnity',^[27] and was quick to pick up on skepticism on the part of investigators. She showed a poor capacity for attention, memory retention, association of images and ideas, and capacity for abstraction. However, she was quick to adapt to new situations. 'it is difficult to take her by surprise: she is always alert, and her shrewdness leads her to immediately recognize friends or enemies, believers or skeptics...'^[28]

There did not seem to be a consistent relation between the depth of the trance and the production of phenomena, which took place in the waking state, as well as in a light and deep hypnotic states.^[29]

Morselli believed Palladino's control 'John King' was a psychological creation of her mind. This personification, dependent to some extent on her early training, resembled a 'systematized fixed idea'^[30] taking a spiritistic identity 'because Eusapia was educated as a medium in a spiritistic environment'.^[31]

John does not exist and has never existed: his existence is reduced to a semblance of life; and this semblance is weak, faint, made up of badly sewn together fragments, is not homogeneous, nor in equilibrium sufficiently stable to give place to an intelligent and affective individual behavior.^[32]

Medical and Physiological Aspects

Morselli mentioned that Palladino suffered from headaches and joint pains. He suspected epilepsy: she once told him that she had convulsions, but that she did not lose consciousness. After a five-year interval during which time he did not see her, he found she looked thinner, older, and was seemingly suffering; she told him that she had felt weak, thirsty and lacked appetite in recent years. At this time, she had diabetes and the concomitant nephritis.

Palladino's trance state, according to Morselli, was associated with increased pulse rate, deep breathing, and changes in her voice. 'Her timbre became gloomy or guttural, her intonation higher: not infrequently, the phonemes produced betray irritation, sarcasm, or eroticism.'^[33] Regarding the pulse in trance, Morselli wrote:

Eusapia begins to slow down the respiratory motions, going from the normal number of 18 to only 15 and 12 inhalations per minute: at the same time, and in full contrast to the law of physiological proportions between breath and pulse, her heart pulsates more frequently and more strongly, coming short of 90-100-120 pulsations. These... are accompanied by specific subjective phenomena (maybe esophageal bolus, some anxiety, cephalic sensations)... But it is well-known that the paroxysms of hysterical neurosis begin with similar events.^[34]

Morselli noticed that Palladino perspired profusely during trance. She told him her menstrual period was more copious and erratic when she held many séances. Coming out of trance, she sometimes was amyosthenic (muscular weakness), and experienced paralysis in her limbs, mainly on the right side.

Concepts of Force and Other Theories

Following on a tradition of magnetic, vital, and nervous forces postulated to explain mediumship and psychic phenomena in general,^[35] Morselli thought that Palladino's physical phenomena were produced by a biopsychic force coming from her body, and sometimes from the body of the sitters, what he called an 'unknown modality of Energy... exteriorized and projected into space'.^[36] He believed it was directed unconsciously by the medium, or by medium and sitters together. Morselli further stated:

We say that everything happens as if the medium's body exteriorizes its biopsychic force... This fact of exopsychicity is not more unintelligible than electricity which propagates at a distance without conductors and produces movement, chemical, luminous, [and] sonic phenomena... Mediums... are just individuals who have the power to exteriorize the psychic force more than others. The immense majority of men manifests it *via* mimicry, with muscular acts, with speech, which is thought transmitted at a distance, or *via* writing which visibly suggests others. Mediums, instead, have an immediate exopsychicity, a vital dynamism that is more powerful in its manifestation the least consciousness takes part.^[37]

The projected force was thought to be stronger when the medium was less conscious. This was because trance could inhibit the higher brain centers, allowing for the lower centers to be involved with the force automatically. Morselli believed that consciousness interfered with automatic processes, taking psychic force into more conventional uses. Consequently, Morselli believed that for mediumship to take place it was necessary to have a 'diminishing or a contraction... of the supraliminal consciousness'.^[38]

Morselli thought that some materialization phenomena required a telepathic component, occurring through a combination of the medium's 'oniric' mind content and information gained through telepathy.

Bibliography

Morselli provides two long bibliographies^[39] of publications in various languages, mainly English, French, German and Italian. One on spiritism covers psychical research,^[40] along with history and doctrine; descriptions and autobiographies of mediums; ideas of psychic forces to explain mediumship and other phenomena; and the psychology of mediumship. Authors include Cesare Baudi di Vesme, Ernesto Bozzano, Catherine Crowe, Louis Figuier, Emma Hardinge, William Howitt, Pierre Janet, Justinus Kerner, Andrew Lang, and Frank Podmore. Among the periodicals listed are *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*, *Banner of Light*, *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, *Light*, *Luce e Ombra*, *Occult Review*, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, *Psychische Studien*, *Religio-philosophical Journal*, *Revue Spirite*, *Revue Spiritualiste*, *Rivista di Studi Psicici*, and *Sphinx*.

A separate bibliography gives articles and book about Palladino^[41] by such authors as Ercole Chiaia, Xavier Dariex, Albert de Rochas, Richard Hodgson, Oliver Lodge, Cesare Lombroso, Julian Ochorowicz, Manuel Otero Acevedo, Charles Richet, and Arnaldo Vassallo. Critical and skeptical publications are also included.

Reception

Reviews of the book were published by Cesar de Vesme^[42] and Cesare Lombroso,^[43] both of whom considered it important, particularly in its psychiatric aspects, but disagreed with Morselli's anti-survival stance, which Lombroso took to be a sign of 'excessive impartiality'.^[44]

Writing in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Eleanor Sidgwick argued that Morselli had failed to appropriately control against fraud. In her view, Morselli

appears to think that when on any particular occasion trickery has not been detected by sensible persons responsible for watching the medium, the presumption is that it has not occurred. In this I cannot agree. I have not the same confidence that he has in my own or any one else's powers of continuous observation, especially in darkness or semi-darkness; and when it has been shown that a medium systematically practises trickery, the presumption, I think, is that on any particular occasion when an unexplained phenomenon takes place, an opportunity for trickery

unobserved by the investigator has been found.^[45]

Italian spiritists felt that Morselli was too harsh about spiritism and about discarnate agency in general. One writer criticized Morselli's tendency to call spiritism a 'sect' using various rites,^[46] questioned the validity of his evidence to claim pathology in mediums,^[47] and pointed out that several other scientists had become convinced of the reality of spirit action.^[48]

A more detailed critique was made by the Italian psychical researcher [Ernesto Bozzano](#), who in his own work defended the existence of discarnate agency. He objected to the way Morselli focused on psychological issues at the expense of veridical information. He also deplored Morselli's view that experienced researchers such as Hodgson and Hyslop were taken in by simple secondary personality phenomena in their study of the Boston medium Leonora Piper.^[49] In some cases, he suggested, Morselli had simply misunderstood the arguments. Bozzano further disagreed with Morselli that mediumistic accounts differed in their presentation of the other world, notably regarding matters relating to reincarnation.

Writers in Italian psychiatry journals were more positive, expressing the hope that Morselli's example would encourage other scientists to engage with the subject,^[50] and that the importance of the field would gradually come to be recognized.^[51]

Massimo Biondi, a historian of Italian psychical research, has called the book an 'ultimate verdict of positivist science' about Palladino, even if it did not solve the problem.^[52]

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Carlos S Alvarado

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ [Vol. 1](#), [Vol. 2](#).
- 2.^ Vol. I, p. 8.
- 3.^ I, p. 10.
- 4.^ Alvarado & Biondi, 2017.
- 5.^ 1, p. 78.
- 6.^ I, p. 93.
- 7.^ I, p. 93.
- 8.^ I, p. 93.
- 9.^ I, p. 95.
- 10.^ I, p. 97.
- 11.^ I, p. 97.
- 12.^ I, p. 105.
- 13.^ I, p. 2.
- 14.^ Carrington, 1909.
- 15.^ I, p. 312.
- 16.^ II, pp. 507-521.
- 17.^ I, p. 186.
- 18.^ I, pp. 253-254.
- 19.^ I, p. 394.
- 20.^ I, pp. 240-241.
- 21.^ I, p. 301.
- 22.^ I, p. 343.
- 23.^ II, p. 142.
- 24.^ on this episode see II, pp. 142-143, 152-156.
- 25.^ II, pp. 106-107.
- 26.^ I, p. 117.
- 27.^ I, p. 130.
- 28.^ I, p. 130.

- 29.^ 1, p. 209.
- 30.^ I, p. 273.
- 31.^ I, p. 273.
- 32.^ II, p. 67.
- 33.^ II, p. 14.
- 34.^ II, pp. 306-307.
- 35.^ Alvarado, 2006.
- 36.^ I, p. 266.
- 37.^ I, pp. 321-322.
- 38.^ I, p. 322.
- 39.^ Alvarado & Biondi, 2008.
- 40.^ I, pp. xvii-xlvi, II, pp. v-xv.
- 41.^ I, pp. 134-170, II, pp. xvii-xviii
- 42.^ de Vesme, 1908.
- 43.^ Lombroso, 1908.
- 44.^ Lombroso, 1908, p. 312.
- 45.^ Sidgwick, 1909, p. 523.
- 46.^ Cavalli, 1908.
- 47.^ Carreras, 1908.
- 48.^ Caccia, 1909.
- 49.^ Bozzano, 1909, p. 302.
- 50.^ Bergamasco, 1908.
- 51.^ Tamburini, 1908, p. 779.
- 52.^ Biondi, 1988, p. 186.