

Biography of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909)

Most remembered as the man who founded the science of criminology, Dr. Cesare Lombroso (1835 – 1909) was an Italian psychiatrist and a hard-core materialist before he began investigating the mediumship of Eusapia Paladino. “If ever there was an individual in the world opposed to spiritism by virtue of scientific education, and, I may say, by instinct, I was that person, he wrote.”¹

Lombroso went on to write that he had made it an indefatigable pursuit of a lifetime to defend the thesis that every force is a property of matter and the soul an emanation of the brain. For years he laughed at the reports he had heard about chairs levitating and spirits communicating through them. However, his attitude began to change in 1891 when he somewhat reluctantly accepted an invitation to attend a séance in a Naples hotel with Paladino. He was warned that he would ruin his reputation, but he felt it was his duty to investigate. He had earlier witnessed some supposed psychic phenomena but dismissed it as hysterics or hypnotic phenomena. “And when I then and there saw extremely heavy objects transferred through the air without contact,” he wrote of his first sitting with Paladino in full daylight, “from that time on I consented to make the phenomena the subject of investigation.”²

After studying at Padua, Paris, and Vienna, Lombroso became professor of psychiatry at Pavia, and then director of the lunatic asylum at Pesaro. He later filled the chairs of forensic medicine and psychiatry at Turin, where he created the science of criminal anthropology, which came to be called criminology and made a branch of social psychology. He further studied the problem of

genius and madness, writing a landmark book on the subject in 1877.



During 1892, Lombroso and nine other researchers, including Dr. Charles Richet, who would later win the Nobel Prize in medicine, observed Eusapia during 17 seances in Milan. They observed table levitations, the levitation of Paladino, apports, the apparitions of hands, and other phenomena. The most dramatic levitation took place on September 28, 1892. While Richet was sitting on one side of Eusapia and holding her hand, Lombroso was holding her hand on the other side. Paladino was in the trance state and complained of hands grasping her under the arms. Her voice then changed and said, “Now I lift my medium up on the table.” The chair holding Paladino began to rise and settled on the top of the table. “After some talk in the trance state the medium announced her descent, and (M. Finzi having been substituted for me) was deposited

on the floor with the same security and precision, while MM. Richet and Finzi followed the movements of her hands and body without at all assisting them, and kept asking each other about the position of the hands. Moreover, during the descent both gentlemen repeatedly felt a hand touch them on the head.”³

The same phenomenon was repeated on October 3 with Dr. Finzi and another researcher on each side of Paladino.

By 1903, Lombroso had observed Paladino many more times, but at a sitting with her in Genoa in 1903, he experienced something new. Before Paladino entered the trance state, Lombroso asked her for some special manifestation that day. Paladino consented. “...after half an hour of the séance had passed, I was seized with a very lively desire to see her promise kept,” Lombroso wrote. “The table at once assented to my thought by means of its usual sign-movements up and down; and soon after (we were then in the semi-obscurity of a red light) I saw detach itself from the curtain a rather short figure like that of my mother, veiled, and which made the complete circuit of the table until it came to me, and whispered to me words heard by many, but not by me, who am somewhat hard of hearing. I was almost beside myself with emotion and begged her to repeat her words. She did so, saying, ‘Cesar, fio mio!’ (I admit at once that this was not her habitual expression, which was, when she met me, ‘mio fiol’; but the mistake in expression made by the apparitions of the deceased are well known, and how they borrow from the language of the psychic and of the experimenters), and removing the veil from her face for a moment, she gave me a kiss.”⁴

Lombroso wrote that his mother reappeared at least 20 times during Paladino’s séances, although less distinct than on that first occasion.

While skeptics might jump on the difference in the greeting expression used by his moth-

er, Lombroso had come to understand that the medium’s brain contributes to the communication, or the communicating spirit’s message must be filtered through the brain and may not necessarily be delivered in the way it is received from the spirit.

Lombroso mentioned that complete materializations with Paladino were rare and that those witnessed with Madame D’Esperance by other researchers were much more marvelous. “With Eusapia they are faces accurately delineated, heads and figures and half-busts of personages who are identified and named, the medium availing herself of notions obtained from the traditional history of Spiritualism. In this case, one must admit that Eusapia acts upon certain invisible defunct beings in such a way as to make them conduct themselves as living beings – a fact demonstrated not merely by the playing of certain instruments and the sounds of voices, but by graphic registrations and reproduction of movements much more complex, and with instruments which cannot influence with her individual will. Furthermore, Eusapia can bring before our eyes the images of deceased persons of whom she had no knowledge before the séance.”⁵

As for the apports observed with Paladino, Lombroso reported that they involved mandolins, drinking glasses, water bottles, and chairs, all of which moved as if held by a hand. “The mandolin has its handle turned toward the medium, the chairs seem to be dragged along by the top or shoulder. Nay, sometimes the fluidic hand has been visible in full light, and seen holding objects, picking the strings of the mandolin, beating the tambourine, lifting things from boxes, putting the metronome in movement without a key. And it was a hand much larger than Eusapia’s resembling that from which the imprints were obtained.”⁶

Lombroso wrote that they could often see fluidic limbs emerging in full light from the shoulder of Paladino or from her skirt and that

these fluidic limbs would perform the function of an arm. Also, John King, Paladino's guide, would often respond in English, a language unknown to Paladino.

Concluding that much of the phenomena was beyond telepathy of any kind, Lombroso came to accept the spirit hypothesis. "I am ashamed and grieved at having opposed with so much tenacity the possibility of psychic facts – the facts exist and I boast of being a slave to facts." he wrote. "There can be no doubt that genuine psychical phenomena are produced by intelligences totally independent of the psychic and the parties present at the sittings."⁷

∞

Copyright 2010 Michael E. Tymn

¹ Lombroso, Cesare, *After Death – What?*, Small, Maynard & Co., 1909, p. 1

² _____, p. 39

³ _____, pp. 49-50

⁴ _____, p. 68

⁵ _____, p. 101

⁶ _____, p. 169

⁷ Fodor, Nandor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science*, University Books, 1966