

Bozzano and Deathbed Visions

To the Editor:

We wish to commend Ronald Siegel and Ada Hirschman (1983) for publishing an historical note about the work on deathbed visions of the Italian psychical researcher Ernesto Bozzano (1923). Their translation of extracts from Bozzano's book follows the example set by other authors in making translations available of the classic paper by Albert Heim (Noyes and Kletti, 1972) and of the paper by Oskar Pfister (Kletti and Noyes, 1981).

We have, however, noted some inaccuracies and incorrect interpretations in Siegel and Hirschman's paper, and we believe we should point these out. We shall mention first a few small points before coming to two that we consider more important.

Although it is useful to have extracts from Bozzano's book more widely available in English, Bozzano had, in fact, as early as 1906, published in English (as well as in Italian and French)¹ his system for classifying deathbed visions (Bozzano, 1906). This publication preceded by four months Bozzano's publication in *Revue du monde invisible*,² which Siegel and Hirschman erroneously state to have been Bozzano's first publication on the topic. Comparison of Bozzano's 1906 report (in English) with the book he published in 1923 (Bozzano, 1923) shows a close similarity of content and even of phrasing. He had, however, added some additional cases during the intervening years.

It is wrong to categorize *Revue métapsychique* as a spiritualist journal. It was (and is) the official publication of the Institut Métapsychique International, which Jean Meyer founded in 1919 as a research organization on the model of the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.). Anyone who studies *Revue métapsychique* can easily learn that its approach to psychical phenomena is not that of committed spiritualists, and in this respect it contrasts markedly with *Revue spirite*, which was a spiritualist publication.

Bozzano's interest in psychical phenomena preceded his participation in sittings with Eusapia Palladino. According to his own "Autobiographical Sketch" (Bozzano, 1924a), Bozzano's interest in psychical phenomena began in 1891, when Théodore Ribot sent him a copy of the first issue of the *Annales des sciences psychiques*. Although we have not learned with certainty the date of Bozzano's first sitting with Eusapia Palladino, we have found no evidence that he sat with her during the early 1890s. Bozzano's biographer, Giovanni Iannuzzo, although not discussing this particular point,

mentions only Bozzano's sittings with Palladino after 1899 (Iannuzzo, 1983). There can be no doubt, however, that Bozzano's experiences with Palladino influenced him markedly.

We cannot agree that Bozzano's slight influence on British and American scholars derived from their ignorance of the languages (Italian and French) in which Bozzano mainly published his work. French was a familiar language to the English-speaking scholars of Bozzano's generation, and many of them could read Italian. The Society for Psychical Research regularly printed notes about or short summaries of articles published in *Revue métapsychique* and occasionally in *Luce e Ombra*. The Presidential Addresses (for the S.P.R.) of Charles Richet, Henri Bergson and Camille Flammarion, as well as occasional other articles, were published by the S.P.R. in French. One of Bozzano's books published in Italian was reviewed in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (Troubridge, 1919). A much more likely explanation of the neglect of Bozzano by British and American scholars can be derived from reading reviews of his books published by the S.P.R. (e.g., Saltmarsh, 1938; Troubridge, 1919; Wilson, 1933). The reviewers invariably reproached him with low standards of evidentiality, faulty reasoning, or insufficient awareness of alternative interpretations for the phenomena he reported. Iannuzzo has recently repeated these criticisms of Bozzano's weaknesses as a scientist (Iannuzzo, 1983, pp. 84-87). Moreover, Bozzano's tendency to write polemically probably alienated more readers than it persuaded to adopt his views.

Siegel and Hirschman state that Bozzano's work on deathbed visions converted Richet to a belief in survival after death. We have not been able to confirm that it did. In several papers and books that Richet published after 1923 (the year Bozzano's book appeared), Richet makes quite clear that he accepted the facts adduced in support of survival (Richet, 1924, 1928; Vesme, 1934). Perhaps Richet came closest to expressing a conviction about survival when, in discussing some deathbed visions cases, he wrote: "Facts of this kind are very important. They are much more explicable on the spiritist theory than by the hypothesis of mere cryptesthesia [ESP]. Among all the facts adduced to prove survival, these even seem to me to be the most disquieting . . . But . . . they are insufficient to make me believe that the consciousness of the deceased persons is present as a phantom . . . [in the cases being discussed]" (Richet, 1922/1923, pp. 353-354). Furthermore, Oliver Lodge (1936) in his obituary of Richet discussed his longstanding friendly disagreement with

Richet on the survival question and emphasized that Richet had not changed his views before he died. "In private," Lodge wrote, "he [Richet] has confessed to me that he was sometimes nearly bowled over by the evidence; but, on the whole, he adhered to his lifelong conviction of the materialistic aspect of the universe" (p. 4).

Siegel and Hirschman refer to a letter Richet is said to have written to Bozzano in which he acknowledged that Bozzano's work had converted him to a belief in survival. They give no reference to this letter, and we wonder where it can be found. Bozzano did publish in *Luce e Ombra* a letter from Richet concerned with the survival question (Bozzano, 1924b), but this letter repeats what Richet had said before and said again later: he accepted the facts but disagreed on their interpretation. In a later work, Richet (1928/1929) mentioned an "open letter" about survival that he had addressed to Bozzano, but he did not give a reference to it, and we can only assume that he meant the letter in *Luce e Ombra* to which we have just referred. Gastone de Boni (1960) referred to another letter that Richet wrote to Bozzano in 1935, and he cited a few phrases of it. De Boni interpreted this letter as indicating that Bozzano's work had converted Richet to a belief in survival, but in the extracts of it that de Boni cited we can find only an expression of enthusiasm for Bozzano's writings, not agreement with his interpretations. We have not been able to learn of any other seemingly relevant letter by Richet to Bozzano.

Is it important, fifty years after Richet's death, to be clear about what he believed? We think it is. In the first place, we should for the dead even more than for the living try to learn and publish the truth about their views. An even more important reason for going into this matter, however, derives from the peculiar nature of the evidence bearing on the question of survival after death. Although many people know *about* such evidence, few scientists have had direct knowledge *of* it, such as Richet had. Richet was, moreover, a scientist of the best training and highest quality. Bozzano, for all his enthusiasm and industry, was not a scientist. If his work had converted Richet to a belief in survival after death, this would have been a notable accomplishment; but we have not found evidence that he did this.

NOTES

1. A brief history of the different editions of Bozzano's monographs on deathbed visions is presented by de Boni (1947).
2. We have not seen that paper.
3. We thank Gastone de Boni, Wayne Norman, and Emily Williams Cook for searching for letters by Richet in issues of *Luce e Ombra* not available in the library of the Division of Parapsychology.

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