

An Examination of Ectoplasm

By Michael E. Tymn

How can anything so repulsive and so repugnant in appearance be real? And how can there possibly be any spiritual connection with it?

No doubt this is the first reaction of intelligent, rational people who come across old photos in books about paranormal phenomena of a substance referred to as *ectoplasm*. The photos usually show a seemingly thick foamy or slimy substance – sometimes looking like vomitus, other times like shaving soap, and still at other times more like cheesecloth – flowing from one of the orifices of a so-called “medium” in an entranced state – from the nostrils, mouth, ears, vagina, and even the pores. Some of the photos show what are claimed to be materialized human forms – occasionally just a face or an arm – forming within the ectoplasm.

If we are to believe the debunkers and skeptics, ectoplasm is nothing more than cheesecloth stuffed into one or more of the cavities of the body and then extruded at an opportune time, the sole purpose being to dupe those present. However, it is difficult to believe that some of the most eminent men of science, who observed it, examined it, tested it, and proclaimed it real, could have been fooled over and over again, especially under laboratory conditions. It stretches the imagination to believe that as much “cheesecloth,” as seen in many of the photographs, could be stored in an orifice of the body, especially the ears and pores, and so dramatically extruded, then to have human forms shaped from it or within it, and then, in some cases, to have those human forms emerging from the ectoplasm and carry on conversations with those present, sometimes about personal matters known only to the sitter.

Equally puzzling is why numerous alleged charlatans would dream up something so seemingly ridiculous and revolting. Couldn’t they come up with a trick a bit more realistic and believable? If it all began with one trickster, why were so many other charlatans impressed by something so bizarre?

**Yes, it is absurd; but no matter
– it is true.**

“It is a whitish substance that creeps as if alive, with damp, cold, protoplasmic extensions that are transformed under the eyes of the experimenters into a hand, fingers, a head, or even into an entire figure,” explained Dr. Charles Richet, the scientist who named it.



Winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Medicine, Richet (1850-1935) was a physiologist, chemist, bacteriologist, pathologist, psychologist, aviation pioneer, poet, novelist, editor, author, and psychical researcher. After receiving his M.D. in 1869 and his Ph.D. in 1878, he served as professor of physiology at the medical school of the University of Paris for 38 years.

It was Richet who gave the name ectoplasm to what had previously been referred to as od, psychic force, and teleplasm. When Sir William Crookes, the esteemed British chemist, first reported on it in connection with the mediumship of Florence Cook, Richet was among the many scientists who scoffed and thought that perhaps

Crookes, a pioneer in X-ray technology, had “lost it.” “I avow with shame that I was among the willfully blind,” Richet wrote in dedicating his 1923 book, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, to Crookes, commending him for his courage and insight.

“This ectoplasmic formation at the expense of the physiological organism of the medium is now beyond all dispute,” Richet stated. “It is prodigiously strange, prodigiously unusual, and it would seem so unlikely as to be incredible; but we must give in to the facts... Yes, it is absurd; but no matter – it is true.”

Richet saw it as some sort of exterior (“ecto” meaning exterior) protoplasm. In his book, Richet referred to the ectoplasm produced by the medium Marthe Béraud as “gelatinous projections,” explaining that “a kind of liquid or pasty jelly emerges from the mouth or the breast of Marthe which organizes itself by degrees, acquiring the shape of a face or limb.

“Under very good conditions of visibility, I have seen this paste spread on my knee, and slowly take form so as to show the rudiment of the radius, the cubitus, or metacarpal bone whose increasing pressure I could feel on my knee,” Richet wrote.

Richet further observed that the materializations are usually gradual, beginning with a rudimentary shape and then complete forms and human faces only appearing later on. “At first these formations are often very imperfect. Sometimes they show no relief, looking more like flat images than bodies, so that in spite of oneself one is inclined to imagine some fraud, since what appears seems to be the materialization of a semblance, and not of a being. But in some cases the materialization is perfect. At the Villa Carmen I saw a fully organized form rise from the floor. At first it was only a white, opaque spot like a handkerchief lying on the ground before the curtain, then this handkerchief quickly assumed the form of a human head level with the floor, and a few moments later

it rose up in a straight line and became a small man enveloped in a kind of white burnous, who took two or three halting steps in front of the curtain and then sank to the floor and disappeared as if through a trap door. But there was no trap door.”

While skeptics find much humor in some of the flat, paper-like materializations, Richet had no difficulty with them. “The fact of the appearance of flat images rather than of forms in relief is no evidence of trickery,” he wrote. “It is imagined, quite mistakenly, that a materialization must be analogous to a human body and must be three-dimensional. This is not so. There is nothing to prove that the process of materialization is other than a development of a completed form after a first stage of coarse and rudimentary lineaments formed under the cloudy substance.”

Richet referenced one sitting in which a communicating spirit said that he could not materialize because he could not remember what he looked like when alive. At a later sitting, this same spirit materialized in body but without a face. In effect, the success of the materialization appears to depend upon the ability of the particular spirit to visualize his old self and somehow project that thought-image into the ectoplasm. Apparently, the ability to do this varies as much with spirits as does artistic ability among humans.

Richet also observed somewhat similar phenomenon with Eusapia Palladino, the controversial Italian medium, although never a full body materialization. She most often produced ectoplasmic arms. He referred to it as a kind of supplementary arm that came from Palladino’s body. “Once I saw a long, stiff rod proceed from her



side," he explained, "which after great extension had a hand at its extremity – a living hand warm and jointed, absolutely like a human hand."

Replying to skeptics, Richet said that we have no warrant to deny a phenomenon because we do not know its laws. "If that were the case we should have to close all scientific books."

While the "veil-like" or "cheesecloth" form is often seen in photographs taken in infrared or phosphorescent light, ectoplasm apparently comes in many forms, including gaseous, liquid, or fibrous. It can assume different colors from soft white to gray and black. It can move slowly but disappear in a flash. It can be stiff or pliable. It can be invisible, seen only by clairvoyants, or seen by all present.

The inconsistent nature of ectoplasm is just one of many aspects of it that defies scientific scrutiny and gives fuel to the attacks by debunkers. Adding to this is the fact that darkness is often required. This is because the ectoplasm is said to be sensitive to light rays, and exposure to light can result in serious injury to the medium, who must reabsorb the ectoplasm at the conclusion of the séance before the lights are turned on. Further complicating the observation is the fact that a materialization "cabinet" is usually required. This cabinet is often nothing more than a corner of the room curtained off for the medium to sit within. It further protects the medium from light rays but is said to also be necessary to concentrate the ectoplasm and permit the spirits a certain privacy in their attempts to take shape.

Of course, the debunkers see the cabinet as nothing more than a "dressing room" which permits the fraudulent medium to quickly change costumes and emerge from the cabinet as a spirit entity. To advance such a debunking theory is to assume that men like Richet, Crookes, Professor Gustave Geley, Baron (Dr.) von Schrenck Notzing, and a dozen or more other distinguished scientists were duped over and over again under controlled

conditions. Only the most arrogant and closed-minded person would dare challenge the observations of these respected scientists without doing any kind of investigation of his or her own, but there were many who continued to scoff and sneer.

Skeptical scientists insisted that ectoplasm was nothing more than cheesecloth or some other substance cleverly packed in the body and regurgitated at an opportune moment. They gave examples of this "rumination hypothesis," showing how some people are able to use the stomach as a hiding place and later bring it back up.

However, as Dr Albert Von Schrenck Notzing, a German forensic psychiatrist, pointed out to the doubters, more than half of the 180 observations of ectoplasm by him did not involve ectoplasm flowing from the mouth. It sometimes came from the nose, from the ears, from the vagina, and quite often just from the pores of the skin. In the case of medium called Eva C (Marthe Beraud), Schrenck Notzing often observed it oozing from the pores near her shoulder.

Schrenck Notzing was so careful in his study of Eva C that he had her completely strip before many of the sittings and then subject herself to a gynecological exam. She was then given special attire, consisting of knitted tights and an apron tunic closed down the back. Before each sitting, the tunic was sewed up at the back, the wrists, and the junction of the tights with the dress. There was, von Schrenck Notzing said, absolutely no opportunity for her to smuggle any kind of foreign substance or object into the room. On several occasions, Eva C volunteered to sit in the nude and did so to satisfy various skeptical scientists who observed the phenomenon with Schrenck Notzing.

"Not one of the observers during these four years has ever found on the medium's body, or in the séance costume, anything which could have been used for the fraudulent production of the phenomena," Schrenck Notzing wrote, adding that the various rooms in different houses had no

secret passages or trap doors, as skeptics claimed, and were regularly examined, both before and after every sitting by him and visiting savants. Moreover, the room was locked by him so that there was no possibility of another person entering.

As Schrenck Notzing pointed out, even if the rumination hypothesis were true, the phenomena did not end with ectoplasm flowing from an orifice of the medium. That was only the first stage. Various objects, including fingers, hands, heads, and occasionally complete body materializations took shape from the ectoplasm. It was one thing to advance the rumination hypothesis, quite another to explain how these various objects formed from the alleged regurgitated material.

To this, the skeptics claimed that Eva C and other mediums had cleverly arranged wires in the room to transport in various objects, but Schrenck Notzing said that this was impossibility as he had the opportunity to examine the room before the medium entered and again at the end of the sitting. Moreover, Eva C did not have access to the room beforehand.

Dr Gustave Geley, a professor of medicine at the University of Lyons and a Laureate of the French Medical Faculty, observed Eva C in his own laboratory twice a week over a three-month period during 1917-18.

"It is needless to say that the usual precautions were rigorously observed during the séances in my laboratory," Geley wrote. "On coming into the room where the séances were held, and to which I alone had previous access, the medium was completely undressed in my presence and dressed in a tight garment, sewn up the back and at the wrists; the hair and the cavity of the mouth were examined by me and my collaborators



before and after the séances. Eva was walked backwards to the wicker chair in the dark cabinet; her hands were always held in full sight outside the curtains, and the room was always quite well lit the whole time. I do not merely say, "There was no trickery," I say, "There was no possibility of trickery."

Geley described the process: "With Eva, the mode of operation necessary to obtain materializations is very simple. The medium, after having been seated in the dark cabinet, is put into the hypnotic state, slightly, but enough to involve forgetfulness of the normal personality. This dark cabinet has no other purpose than to protect the sleeping medium from disturbing influences, and especially from the action of light. It is thus possible to keep the séance room sufficiently well lit for perfect observations.

"The phenomena appear (when they do appear) after a variable interval, sometimes very brief, sometimes an hour or more. They always begin by painful sensations in the medium; she sighs and moans from time to time much like a woman in childbirth. These moans reach their height just when the manifestation begins, they lessen or cease when the forms are complete."

Of the ectoplasm, Geley wrote: "The substance exudes specially from the natural orifices and the extremities, from the top of the head, from the nipples, and the ends of the fingers...the most easily observed from the mouth...The substance has variable aspects; sometimes, and most characteristically, it appears as a plastic paste, a true protoplasmic mass; sometimes as a number of fine threads; sometimes as strings of different thickness in narrow and rigid lines; sometimes as a wide band; sometimes as a fine tissue of ill-defined and irregular shape... In fine, the substance is essentially amorphous, or rather, polymorphous."

Of the quantity, Geley said this is also very variable, sometimes very little and at other times covering the medium completely, like a cloak. It

most frequently appeared white, but occasionally black or gray.

“Sometimes it is slowly evolved, rises and falls, and moves over the medium’s shoulders, her breast, or her lap with a crawling, reptilian movement; sometimes its motion is abrupt and rapid, it appears and disappears like a flash. It is extremely sensitive, and its sensitiveness is closely connected with that of the hyperaesthetised medium, and touch reacts painfully on the latter...The substance is sensitive to light rays; a light, especially if sudden and unexpected, produces a painful start in the medium. However, in some cases the substance can stand even full light. The magnesium flashlight (flash camera) causes a violent start in the medium...It shrinks from all contact and is always ready to avoid them and to be reabsorbed.”

Several other scientists collaborated with Geley in his study of Eva C “We saw, touched, and photographed representations of heads and faces formed from the original substance,” Geley wrote. “These were formed under our eyes, the curtains being half-drawn. Sometimes they proceeded from a cord of solid substance issuing from the medium, sometimes they were progressively developed in a fog of vaporous substance condensed in front of her, or at her side.”

Schrenck Notzing also reported that when he tried to capture some ectoplasm it evaporated and seemed to be reabsorbed by the medium. However, there was some residue left behind, which Schrenck Notzing had chemically analyzed.

“As regards the structure of the teleplasm (ectoplasm), we only know this,” Schrenck Notzing wrote. “That within it, or about it, we find conglomerates of bodies resembling epithelium, real plat epithelium with nuclei, veil-like filmy structures, coherent lamellar bodies without structure, as a well as fat globules and mucus.”

Whether or not this residue represented the true nature of the ectoplasm or was just that part



associated with Eva’s own body Schrenck Notzing had no way of knowing. One thing for sure, he commented, the substance did not consist of India rubber, which many skeptics had suggested it was.

As reported above, Dr Charles Richet, a Nobel Prize winning scientist, also attested to the genuineness of the phenomena produced by Eva C.

Interestingly, Richet, Schrenck Notzing, and Geley all resisted the spiritistic hypothesis, the idea that the phenomena were being produced by spirits. All saw it as a possibility and indications are that Geley came around to see it as the most likely explanation. Indications also are that Richet and Schrenck Notzing may have privately accepted the idea that spirits were producing the phenomena, but publicly they would not admit to it. They were hard-core scientists and there was no room for spirits in their belief system. They simply wrote it off as something that was beyond science at the time.

Yet, in spite of the fact that these three distinguished scientists witnessed it over and over again and attested to the non-fraudulent nature of Eva’s mediumship, modern references on Eva all suggest that fraud was involved, that the three scientists were duped by a master magician.

One debunking theory holds that Eva had a hollow tooth and therefore was able to smuggle

things into the séance rooms in her tooth. Whether or not she actually had a hollow tooth is unclear from the modern sources.

Another debunking theory had to do with Juliette Bisson, an influential artist who had become interested in hypnotism, telepathy, and clairvoyance because her physician father was interested in the subjects as she was growing up. She collaborated with Schrenck Notzing in studying Eva and at some point allowed Eva, who was later married, to live with her and her husband in their Paris home. It was Mme. Bisson who did the gynecological exams and then put Eva into the trance state. One debunking theory that has been handed down and accepted in modern references is that the two women had a lesbian relationship and therefore Bisson was a confederate in the sham.

Since Eva was strictly an amateur and apparently was not paid for her sittings, it is never made clear by those advancing this theory what the two women had to gain from the regular sittings – more than 180 by Schrenck Notzing over a four-year period, some lasting over two hours and quite a few in which they sat for an hour before anything developed, and still others in which nothing at all happened. What was the point of it all? There was no reality TV in those days.

The facts that Mme. Bisson was well-to-do and that Eva C preferred not to use her real name also seem to be in conflict with such a theory.

After Geley's death in a 1924 plane crash, it was reported that a study of his notes supposedly indicated that Geley found objects hidden in Eva's hair in a most suspicious way, even though he made no mention of these in his reports. Geley's notes were never produced to confirm such a claim.

Perhaps more than anything, the debunkers pointed to some of the "ridiculous" manifestations produced from the ectoplasm, several of

which looked like they had come from a local magazine. Such manifestations will be discussed below.

Schrenck Notzing mentioned that one of the scientists he invited to a sitting was in awe of what he saw and fully agreed with him that fraud was not possible under the strictly controlled conditions. However, a week or so later, this same scientist stated that he had changed his mind because what he had witnessed was not possible and therefore it had to be a trick beyond his comprehension.

Schrenck Notzing further observed that every scientist who was introduced to the subject matter seemed to discount all research that had gone on before them. "It is unfortunate," he wrote, "that learned men, who see the phenomena for the first time, commit the error of supposing that their entry into the arena marks the beginning of the proper investigation of mediumistic phenomena. They disregard the copious literature and the many strictly scientific reports of their colleagues, such as the numerous unrefuted results obtained by eminent investigators with the medium Eusapia Paladino..."

Schrenck Notzing also observed that the cynical press was quick to accept unsubstantiated debunking reports and sensationalize them, thereby defaming innocent people. These sensationalized reports then became "fact" as far as the public is concerned and later became part of standard reference books, muddying up the waters so that people don't know what to believe.

If Eva C had been the only person producing ectoplasm and related phenomena, then there might be justification for being skeptical, but the fact is that the phenomena were observed by many distinguished men and women and their reports were consistent with those of Drs. Schrenck Notzing, Geley, and Richet.

Vice-Admiral W. Usborne Moore, a retired British naval commander, began investigating mediums in 1904. One of the first he sat with was Cecil Husk, an English materialization medium. Like so many mediums of the day, Husk had been charged with fraud a number of years earlier.

“Mr. Cecil Husk’s séances have been the theme of many discussions amongst spiritists,” Moore addressed the concerns. “I have sat with him over forty times, and have only once suspected fraud. On that occasion the conditions were bad, and I am by no means sure that my doubts were reasonable. Even supposing my first ideas were correct, there were good reasons for attributing the trick I thought I had witnessed to unconscious fraud.”

As Moore came to understand unconscious fraud, the medium, while in a trance state, will sometimes be prompted by spirits to move things when the power is low and the spirits cannot accomplish it on their own. Such unconscious fraud was interpreted by skeptical investigators to be outright fraud rather than unconscious attempts to achieve a result.

Moore also noted that many materializations with Husk as well as with other mediums did not look completely lifelike. Some looked like stage dummies while others had a parchment appearance. Some were just heads, others busts of the person. Many were only half or two-thirds normal human size. Moore came to understand that many of the unlikelike materializations were failed attempts by spirits to fully materialize.

These unlikelike manifestations, like partial materializations (hands only, arms, heads) were scoffed at by the skeptics and debunkers. “Did the charlatan think we would believe that something so ridiculous is the materialization of a spirit entity?” the smug debunker would ask. Indeed, were all the mediums who produced these strange unlikelike objects so stupid as to think they could fool people with them? It is easier for those with open

minds to believe that they were, as Moore concluded, failed attempts at materialization.

As indicated above, Dr Charles Richet, a Nobel-Prize winning scientist, told of one sitting in which a communicating spirit said that he could not materialize because he could not remember what he looked like when alive. At a later sitting, this same spirit materialized in body but without a face.

Admiral Moore was present in England when William T Stead, a social activist, began communicating through several mediums, including Etta Wriedt, after dying in the *Titanic* disaster. Stead explained that there were souls on his side who had the power of sensing people (mediums) who could be used for communication. One such soul helped him find mediums and showed him how to make his presence known. It was explained to him that he had to visualize himself among the people in the flesh and imagine that he was standing there in the flesh with a strong light thrown



upon himself. "Hold the visualization very deliberately and in detail, and keep it fixed upon my mind, that at that moment I was there and they were conscious of it," Stead explained, adding that the people at one sitting were able to see only his face because he had seen himself as only a face. "I imagined the part they would recognize me by."

It was in the same way he was able to get a message through. He stood by the most sensitive person there, concentrated his mind on a short sentence, and repeated it with much emphasis and deliberation until he could hear part of it spoken by the person.

In her 1892 book, *There is No Death*, Florence Marryat, a popular writer of the Victorian era, told of a sitting with a medium in which an old family friend, John Powles, communicated but initially declined to materialize. Peter, the medium's spirit control, communicated that "he doesn't want to show himself because he's not a bit like what he used to be." However, when Marryat persuaded Powles to show himself, she saw only a face that didn't resemble her old friend in the slightest. She wrote that it was "hard, stiff, and unlikelike. Powles then told her that he would try to do better the next time.

For the next sitting, Marryat brought along a necktie that had belonged to Powles, keeping it in her pocket and telling no one about it. Soon after the séance began, Peter told Marryat to hand over the necktie and put it on Powles' neck.

"The face of John Powles appeared, very different from the time before, as he had his own features and complexion, but his hair and beard which were auburn during life, appeared phosphoric, as though made by living fire," Marryat wrote, adding that she then mounted a chair, put the tie around his neck and asked if she could kiss him. Powles shook his head, but Peter then told her to give him her hand. "I did so, and as he kissed it his moustaches burned me," Marryat wrote. "I

cannot account for it. I can only relate the fact. After which he disappeared with the necktie, which I have never seen since, though we searched the little room for it thoroughly."

The *prima facie* most impressive evidence there could be of the survival of a deceased friend or relative would be to see and touch his materialized, recognizable bodily form, which then speaks in his or her characteristic manner," wrote CJ Ducasse, a professor of philosophy at Brown University in his 1961 book, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in Life After Death*. "This is what appeared to occur in my presence on an occasion three or four years ago, when during some two hours and in very good red light throughout, some eighteen fully material forms – some male, some female, some tall, some short, and sometimes two together – came out of and returned to the curtained cabinet I had inspected beforehand, in which a medium sat, and to which I had found no avenue of surreptitious access."

Ducasse went on to explain that the material forms were recognized by other sitters and in some cases the deceased spoke and caressed the living. One of the forms called his name and Ducasse went up to her and asked who she was. "Mother," she replied. "She did not, however, speak, act, or in the least resemble my mother," Ducasse continued the story. "This was not a disappointment to me since I had gone there for purposes not of consolation but of observation." The friend who had taken Ducasse to the circle informed him that his mother had materialized on a number of occasions and that the form sometimes looked like her and sometimes it did not.

Whether it was his mother or not, Ducasse was fairly certain it was a materialized spirit. "I can say only that if the form I saw which said it was my mother and which patted me on the head, was a hallucination – a hallucination "complete" in the sense just stated – then no difference remains between a complete hallucination on the one hand

and, on the other, ordinary veridical perception of a physical object; for every further test of the physicality of the form seen and touched could then be alleged to be itself hallucinatory and the allegation of complete hallucination then automatically becomes completely vacuous.”

Ducasse also had an opportunity to see the ectoplasm in good red light, to touch it, and take ten flash photos of the substance as it emanated from the mouth of the medium. “Whether or not it was “ectoplasm,” [it] did not behave, feel, or look like any other substance known to me could, I think, under the conditions that existed. It was coldish, about like steel. This made it seem moist, but it was dry and slightly rough like dough the surface of which had dried. Its consistency and weight were also dough-like. It was a string, of about pencil thickness, varying in length from six to twelve feet. On other photographs, not taken by me, of the same medium, it has veil-like and rope-like forms.”

When we consider Richet’s comments about the spirit who forgot what he looked like when alive in the flesh, as well as Stead’s comments about having to visualize himself in order to show himself, and Marryat’s comments about Powles’ first attempt not looking anything like she remembered him and his telling her he would try again, Ducasse’s comments about the spirit claiming to be his mother not looking like she did when alive makes some sense as it becomes clear to the open-minded person that the process of a spirit materializing all or part of the body is a very complex and difficult procedure.

Much more recently in his 2008 book *Life After Death: Some of the Best Evidence*, Dr. Jan W Vandersande, a physicist, tells of his own observations of ectoplasm, while living in South Africa during the 1970s, with several mediums, including Kitty Gordon, under red light.

“Ectoplasm started pouring out of Kitty’s nose and started to form a gauze-like sheet similar

to that seen in photographs of the Johannesburg medium. One of the sitters was then told to pick up the end of the ectoplasm on the floor, hold it high (about 5-6 feet) and then pull it partly across the room (about 4-6 feet) while it was still attached to Kitty’s nose. It was truly spectacular to see. The ectoplasm was slightly transparent. The person holding the ectoplasm was then told to drop the ectoplasm. It fell to the ground and disappeared (quite fast, within seconds) back into Kitty’s nose. Besides the very clear sight of ectoplasm there was also a very noticeable smell; I would call it a smell very much like a perspiration smell. It was a truly amazing experience and I have absolutely no doubt that it was ectoplasm we had just seen.”

The cover of Vandersande’s book has a photo taken by Professor Jack Allen, one of Vandersande’s colleagues who taught anatomy at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, of a materialized spirit, who had a very black beard, one that most people would say was a fake beard. However, if we can accept the projected-image explanation and Marryat’s comment about Powles’ beard appearing phosphoric, we can understand how this materializing spirit probably visualized himself with a very black beard rather than a gray one.

The projected-image explanation might also help us understand why materialized spirits are seen wearing clothes. If you were attempting to project an image of yourself to someone over the phone, it is unlikely you would project a picture of yourself in the nude.

And so it was also with the phenomenon called spirit photography. In order to project their images on to the photographic plates, the spirits said they had to remember what they looked like and then project that image. In one case, a spirit communicated that he had to visit his old home, view a portrait of himself on the mantel in order to remember what he looked like, and then return.

In fact, a number of old spirit photographs turned out to resemble old portraits of the person, which led debunkers to assume that the photographer/medium somehow obtained an old photo of the person and transposed it to the photographic plate – a reasonable assumption for those who close their minds to the reality of the spirit world and are determined to find fraud without attempting to understand spiritual science.

An article in the January 1933 issue of *Psychic Science* told of an experiment conducted by T Glen Hamilton, MD, a Canadian psychical researcher, in which two spirit communicators built an ectoplasmic ship. Coming through two mediums, the spirit communicators carried on a dialogue in which they pretended they were on a pirate ship and among a crew of ruffian pirates. It was stated that this play-acting was intended to recover past memories and better facilitate a thought-image of the ship.

Hamilton remarked: “No matter how great we may conceive the unknown powers of the human organism to be, we cannot conceive of it giving rise to an objective mass showing purposive mechanistic construction, such as that disclosed in this ship-teleplasm (ectoplasm). We are forced to conclude that the supernormal personalities in this case (by some means yet unknown to us) so manipulated or otherwise influenced the primary materializing substance after it had left the body, or was otherwise brought into its objective state, as to cause it to represent the idea which they, the unseen directors, had in view, namely the idea of a sailing ship.”

When we begin to understand how thought-imagery plays into materialization, things begin to make more sense. Still, however, the debunker wants to apply terrestrial science to celestial matters and continues to scoff.

The first infra-red photo (above) shows a materialization in process with the medium Ethel Post Parrish. Note the ectoplasmic trail from the



medium in the cabinet to the materialization. The second photo (below) shows the completed materialization of a spirit giving her name as Silver Belle, an Indian girl who claimed to be Parrish’s spirit guide.



It is easy to dismiss the completed materialization as a fake, since it looks much more like a painting or a mannequin than a real person. However, an understanding of the ideoplastic nature of the materialization phenomenon helps us make sense of it, assuming an open mind.

One Internet site states that Professor Julian Ochorowicz, a Polish psychologist and psychical researcher, coined the term “ideoplastic,” referring to the “unconscious power of a medium to create tangible and apparently autonomous physical forms.” However, the author, who calls it a “stupid” idea, shows his own ignorance, as it is not the

power of the “medium” that creates the materialization. It is the ability of the communicating “spirit” to project its image into the ectoplasm emitted by the medium.

In his 1942 book, *Life Now and Forever*, Arthur J. Wills, PhD, president of the US College of Psychic Science and Research, tells of an experiment carried out by Mary C. Viasek and Mrs. Z.J. Allyn, a materialization medium.

Mrs. Viasek, who had learned to travel out of body, told Mrs. Allyn that she would attempt to visit her circle on September 28 while she was traveling by train from California to Toledo, Ohio. At the time of the séance in Los Angeles, the train was in Utah. After leaving her body, Viasek willed herself to Allyn’s circle in Los Angeles. The circle was already in progress and Viasek entered the materialization cabinet, where she found Allyn entranced in a chair and a number of spirits waiting to materialize. The “cabinet guide” told her that she was welcome to observe but because she was mortal she could not participate.

Viasek then observed three “spirit chemists” collecting something. Looking closer, she saw a band of light, of bluish-grey vibrations, resembling heat waves, passing around the circle and into the cabinet.

“The stream of vibrations started from the medium’s husband, Mr. Allyn, who sat by the right side of the cabinet, and gradually increased in size as the various members of the circle contributed their vibrations to it,” Wills quoted the report, going on to explain that the stream was about two inches in width and six inches in depth and increased in size as it passed around the circle and then into the cabinet, at which time it was about a foot in width and 18 inches in depth. It was further noted that not all of the sitters contributed to the stream, as it appeared to go around a couple of them.

Once the stream reached the cabinet, a spirit chemist took it and appeared to pour it into the back of the head and neck of the medium. At the same time that the light, bluish-grey vibrations were being poured into the medium, a white substance (not named, but apparently ectoplasm), began to emanate from the medium’s chin, throat, and chest. This emanation was then taken by another spirit chemist and put over the spirit to be clothed.

As he was pouring the substance over the spirit, he said in a firm positive voice: “Think your features! Think your face! Think your eyes! Think your form! Think positively! Think your form as you were on earth! Think your arms!” As the spirit thought these things a form gradually built up over him.

All the while the circle members were singing in order to establish and maintain harmonious vibrations. When they finished one hymn and before starting another hymn, the materialization failed as “the substance fell from the spirit.” The spirit chemist then began attempting to clothe another spirit and it also failed when the hymn was abruptly changed. Viasek noted that the vibrations changed when the singing changed and interfered with the manifestations.

During these failures, Viasek was in the cabinet but could not get her feet on the floor. When the group members started singing *Shall We Gather at the River*, her feet touched and she found herself standing in front of one of the chemists. He said, “You are mortal. You cannot go,” but she appealed to him and he then consented. The chemist then turned her around with her back toward him and began pouring the substance drawn from the medium over her, while saying: “Think your features positively, just as you are! Think your hair! Your eyes! Think your form! Think your arms! Think your hands! Think your feet!”

Then the chemist placed some substance over her to form her dress, a garment of white lace.

“This was a creation of the chemist, not of her thought.”

When Viasek stepped through the curtain into the circle, she felt that she was blind for several seconds, but her sight then came to her. However, she found she could not speak. As one of the sitters approached her, she received “strengthening vibrations” and was able to speak.

As she began to talk to the group, something happened to upset the vibrations of the circle and Viasek felt as if her breath had been knocked out of her by a blow to the solar plexus. She stepped backwards toward the cabinet and seemed to lose consciousness before regaining it again and observing other materialization successes and failures. She could not discern exactly when the forms began to materialize, but she noted that they began to dissolve outside the cabinet. What little of the substance was left when the materialization dissolved flowed toward the incoming stream of light, bluish-gray vibrations.

Members of the circle confirmed Viasek’s materialization and it was noted that her “breathing” problems began when Dr HH Turner, one of the circle member, increased the light in the room so that he could make a note of the time and record Viasek’s words.

As indicated earlier, some spirits communicated that they were unable to materialize because they had difficulty remembering what they looked like when alive in the flesh. Thus, the ability or inability of Silver Belle to visualize what she looked like when incarnate can explain the seemingly hokey appearance. She probably lived before photography, but may have had a painting of herself to visualize, or perhaps she had an idealized recollection of what she looked like.

Visualization self-experiment

A little self-experiment will help in better appreciating the problems involved in both materializations and spirit photography. Imagine, if

you will, that you were once a great athlete. Further imagine that you are sitting at home when you receive a phone call from the director of your sport’s Hall of Fame.

He or she tells you that you have been voted into the Hall and will be inducted next month. Two photographs of you are needed – an action shot and a portrait. The director tells you that the Hall has the latest in photographic technology. All you have to do is visualize the two photos you want put on the Hall of Fame wall and transmit those visualizations over the telephone lines. Those visualizations will be recorded on a special machine and photographs made of them.

Now, visualize the action shot you want to transmit over the telephone wires. Then, visualize your portrait shot. If you are a man, it’s unlikely that you imagined yourself as you appear looking in the mirror when you shave in the morning, and if you are a woman it’s highly unlikely that you imagined yourself as you appear before putting on your makeup in the morning. If you are much over 40, you probably transmitted an image of yourself at a younger age.

The fact is that most of us really have a somewhat distorted image of ourselves. Often the image is based on photographs, including portraits, of ourselves when we are looking our best, both younger and slimmer. Moreover, we don’t always visualize ourselves from head to foot. Was the action image you sent a full body shot or just an upper body shot?

When I mentally searched for an action shot of myself, I focused in on a photograph of myself during the 1977 New York City Marathon. The photo is from the waist up only. Although I ran scores of races during my younger years, I cannot really visualize a moment in any one of those races that is not recorded on a photograph; thus, I had to rely on a photograph of myself.

And so with this little self-experiment we might appreciate the problem spirits had in transmitting photographs of themselves in the phenomenon known as spirit photography. Many of those old photos were supposedly debunked because they looked very much like photographs or portraits that were taken of the person when he or she was alive. It was assumed that the photographer somehow got hold of an old photograph of the person, doctored it a little, and used it to trick his gullible customer.

When I summon up an image of my brother, who died in 1971, I visualize him as he appeared in his high school graduation photo, not at some moment in time that was not recorded anywhere other than in my memory. I can bring up the latter if I stop to search my memory for a time when I was with my brother, but it is much easier to just bring up the graduation photo.

A spirit photo purporting to have come from Father Junipero Serra, the early California missionary, shows Father Serra with his mother. It appears very hokey, because his mother is only about half his height, meaning around three-feet tall, and Father Serra appears somewhat wooden. However, when we consider the ideoplastic nature of the phenomenon, it makes sense. Father Serra lived before photography and probably didn't have many mirrors, if any, around his missions. Thus, the projection was far from representing what he really looked like and probably indicates that he saw himself so much taller than his mother.

In 1914, Dr William J Crawford, a lecturer in mechanical engineering at Queen's University of Belfast, Ireland, began investigating the mediumship of 16-year-old Kathleen Goligher. The phenomena surrounding the young girl included communicating raps, trance voice, and table levitations. Through much experimentation Crawford discovered that "psychic rods" emanating from Goligher and made up of ectoplasm were responsible for the levitations.



During December 1915, Crawford invited Sir William Barrett, professor of physics at Royal College in Dublin, to join him. At first, they heard knocks, and messages were spelled out as one of the sitters recited the alphabet. Barrett then reported observing a floating trumpet, which he tried unsuccessfully to catch. "Then the table began to rise from the floor some 18 inches and remained suspended and quite level," Barrett wrote. "I was allowed to go up to the table and saw clearly no one was touching it, a clear space separating the sitters from the table."

Barrett put pressure on the table to try to force it back to the floor. He exerted all his strength but was unable to budge it. "Then I climbed on the table and sat on it, my feet off the floor, when I was swayed to and fro and finally tipped off," Barrett continued the story. "The table of its own accord now turned upside down, no one touching it, and I tried to lift it off the ground, but it could not be stirred; it appeared screwed down to the floor."

When Barrett stopped trying to right the table, it righted itself on its own accord. Apparently, the spirits were having a bit of fun with Barrett as he then heard “numerous sounds displaying an amused intelligence.”

During his experiments with Goligher, Crawford began communicating with spirit entities, one of whom said he was a medical man when on earth and that his primary function was to look after the health of the young medium. This spirit explained to Crawford that two types of substances were used in the production of the phenomena. One was taken in large quantities from both the medium and the sitters, then returned to them at the close of the séance. The other substance, apparently the ectoplasm, called “psychic force” by Crawford, was taken exclusively from the medium in minute quantities and could not be returned to her as its structure was broken up. It was pointed out that it came from the interior of the medium’s nerve cells and if too much were taken she could suffer serious injury.

Some of the communication took place through Goligher’s voice mechanism while she was in trance while much of it came through raps and table tilting. Crawford came to see the experimentation as a joint venture with the spirit “operators.” He soon realized that these “operators” didn’t understand much about the scientific aspects of the phenomena. “I am convinced that the operators know next to nothing of force magnitudes and reactions,” Crawford wrote in his 1918 book, *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena*. “Their idea as to the prime cause of the phenomena is “power.””

On one occasion, a clairvoyant joined in the circle and told Crawford that she could see “a whitish vapory substance, somewhat like smoke,” forming under the surface of the table and increasing in density as it was levitated. She could see it flowing from the medium in sort of a rotary motion. From other sitters, she could see thin bands

joining into the much larger amount coming from the medium. She also saw various spirit forms and spirit hands manipulating the “psychic stuff.”

Crawford brought in a scale large enough to hold the medium while she was sitting in her chair. He discovered that when a table was being levitated, the weight of the table, usually around 16 pounds, was transferred to the medium through the “psychic rods.” Most of the time, the transfer of weight would be a few ounces short of the weight of the table. Further experimentation revealed that the extra weight was being transferred to the sitters in the room, who might have had furnished small amounts of the “psychic force.”

Crawford pointed out that he continually worked under the levitated table and between the levitated table and the medium and conducted many of his experiments in adequate light, although it became obvious to him that light affected the rigidity of the rapping rods, i.e., the rods could not be made stiff if strong light was playing upon them.

During his 87 sittings with the Goligher circle, Crawford made a number of other observations, including that the psychic rods could extend only about five feet from the medium’s body and that it often took a half hour for the psychic energy to build up. He further observed that the psychic energy often caused the medium to make slight involuntary motions with her feet – motions which might suggest fraud to a careless observer.

“I have come to the general conclusion from the results of my experimental work, and from observations of the circle extending over two and a half years, that all the phenomena produced are caused by flexible rod-like projections from the body of the medium; that these rods are the prime cause of the phenomena, whether they consist of levitations, movements of the table about the floor, rappings, touchings, or other variations,” Crawford wrote.

On July 30, 1920, Crawford committed suicide. Skeptics immediately concluded that Crawford must have realized he had been duped. However, Crawford's suicide note stated it had nothing to do with his work and that he was certain it would stand up.

When we look at the cumulative testimony, many concerns and questions seem to be answered. To begin with, the very strange and weird materializations are likely failed efforts on the part of the spirit entities. If only a hand or an arm materializes, it may be because the medium has limited power or because harmony among the group is lacking. If only a face appears, it may be because the spirit entity is projecting an image of just his face rather than his whole body. Materializations that don't look like the person when alive may be a result of the spirit's inability to image his old self and project that image into the ectoplasm.

The fact that some materialized spirits resemble the medium and speak with a voice similar to the medium's may be because the medium's vital fluids are contributing to the materialization. The fact that the vocabulary more closely resembles the medium's may be because the ideas must filter through the medium's mind before being expressed in words.

We might also conclude that mediums vary in their power, some requiring more darkness than others, some not requiring a cabinet, some able to produce full materializations, some not. Moreover, harmony is an essential element, and negativity, especially a researcher intent upon finding fraud, will prevent the production of phenomena.

Indications are that many physical mediums were written off as charlatans because the investigators simply didn't understand what was going on.

In effect, Professor Ducasse may have been correct in stating that "the *prima facie* most impres-

sive evidence there could be of the survival of a deceased friend or relative would be to see and touch his materialized, recognizable bodily form, which then speaks in his or her characteristic manner,"

The skeptics ask how come we don't hear of such phenomena today. While seemingly much more rare than it was a century ago, there are occasionally reports of mediums producing ectoplasm and materializations of one kind or another taking place in different parts of the world.

Australian medium David Thompson reportedly has produced much in the way of materialization phenomena, according to retired lawyer and psychical researcher Victor Zammit, who states he and six others in a circle have witnessed ectoplasm coming from Thompson's mouth as Thompson was bound to a chair and gagged – test measures to rule out fraud – while unconscious.

"After some 15 minutes and under red light, we all saw ectoplasm coming out of the medium's mouth moving very slowly outwardly towards the floor," Zammit related by e-mail, going on to explain that it extended at least five feet and looked like thick white smoke. And a number of spirits have communicated at the Thompson séances.

Stewart Alexander, a British medium, is also said to have produced the direct-voice and full materializations in recent séances. The Zerdin Phenomenal organization, based in England, exists today to further explore physical mediumship.

At least a dozen theories have been advanced to explain the decline in materialization mediumship. The most popular one is that people of yesteryear, being without radio and television and living in smaller communities, were much more inclined to socialize and experiment with mediumship circles. Today's fast-paced lifestyle simply does not lend itself to such experimentation, especially the harmony and dedication required. Where such conditions exist, the mediums

and circle members, having seen the scorn heaped upon earlier mediums and circles, are inclined to remain “underground.”

On the other hand, it may be that, as Crookes was told, the spirits were experimenting on their side, just as Crookes was on his side. Perhaps they completed their experiments or may have, upon seeing several mediums severely injured when exposed to light, realized that the risks were too great. Maybe they felt that debunkers were damaging the reputations of too many good mediums by calling them cheaters. Maybe they concluded that they gave us enough in the way of evidence and nothing was to be gained by giving us more. Possibly the experimenters were lower-level spirits and the higher-level spirits issued a cease and desist order, or just to back off until science is more open-minded.

Indeed, the ectoplasm and materialization phenomenon gives meaning to the idiom coined by Thomas Paine that there is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous.

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