

Biography of Charles Richet (1850-1935)

Winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Medicine, Dr. Charles Robert Richet (August 25, 1850 to December 4, 1935) was a French physiologist, chemist, bacteriologist, pathologist, psychologist, aviation pioneer, poet, novelist, editor, author, and psychical researcher. Born in Paris, he received his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1869 and his Doctor of Science in 1878. He then served as professor of physiology at the medical school of the University of Paris for 38 years.

Richet was awarded the Nobel Prize for his research on anaphylaxis, the sensitivity of the body to alien protein substance. He also contributed much to research on the nervous system, anesthesia, serum therapy, and neuro-muscular stimuli. He served as editor of the *Revue Scientifique* for 24 years and contributed to many other scientific publications.

Initially, Richet, like so many of his peers, was a closed-minded materialist. He admitted to scoffing at the reports by British physicist and chemist William Crookes of his sittings with the mediums Daniel Dunglas Home and Florence Cook during the early 1870s. "...I avow with shame that I was among the willfully blind," he wrote in his 1923 book, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, which he dedicated to Crookes and Frederic W. H. Myers, another pioneering psychical researcher, commenting in the dedication that these two men, "equally distinguished by their courage and by their insight, were the first to trace the outlines of this science."¹

When Eusapia Paladino, an Italian peasant, began producing phenomena somewhat similar to that of D. D. Home, Richet, still puzzled by Crookes's reports on Home, expressed an interest in studying her. After attending evidential ex-

periments with Paladino in Milan during 1884, Richet began taking an active interest in psychical research. He befriended many of the top psychical researchers of the day, including Crookes, Myers, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Dr. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. In addition to Palladino, he studied Marthe Béraud (Eva C.), William Eglinton, Stephan Ossowiecki, Elisabeth D'Esperance, and others. He served as president of the Society for Psychical Research of London in 1905.



Richet gave the name "ectoplasm" to what had previously been referred to as teleplasm. "The word 'ectoplasm,' which I invented for the experiments with Eusapia, seems entirely justified," he wrote, explaining that it is a kind of gelatinous protoplasm, formless at first, that exudes from the body of the medium, and takes form later. "In the early stages there are always white veils and milky patches and the faces, fingers, and drawings are formed little by little in the midst of this kind of gelatinous paste that resembles moist

and sticky muslin.” He added that materializations are ectoplasm, “sarcoïdic extensions emanating from the body of a medium, precisely as a pseudopod from an amoeboid cell.”²

Many researchers of the day were convinced that Paladino was a charlatan, at best a mixed medium, sometimes producing genuine phenomena and other times cheating. However, Richet, who had more than 200 sittings with her, defended her. “Even if there were no other medium than Eusapia in the world, her manifestations would suffice to establish scientifically the reality of telekinesis and ectoplasmic forms,” he wrote, going on to explain that in her trance condition “the ectoplasmic arms and hands that emerge from the body of Eusapia do only what they wish, and though Eusapia knows what they do, they are not directed by Eusapia’s will; or rather there is for the moment no Eusapia.”³ In effect, he was saying that it was unconscious “fraud” on her part.

Marthe Béraud (given the pseudonym “Eva C”) also impressed Richet. He first studied her in Algiers during 1905, then returned the following year for further experiments under more rigorous conditions. “The materializations produced were very complete,” he wrote of his second trip. “The phantoms of Bien Boa appeared five or six times under satisfactory conditions in the sense that he could not be Marthe masquerading in a helmet and sheet. Marthe would have had not only to bring, but also to conceal afterwards, the helmet, the sheet, and the burnous (hooded cloak worn by Arabs). Also Marthe and the phantom were both seen at the same time. To pretend that Bien Boa was a doll is more absurd still; he walked and moved, his eyes could be seen looking around, and when he tried to speak his lips moved. He seemed so much alive that, as we could hear his breathing, I took a flask of baryta water to see if his breath would show carbon dioxide. The experiment succeeded. I did not lose sight of the flask from the moment when I put it into the hands of Bien Boa who seemed to float in

the air on the left of the curtain at a height greater than Marthe could have been even if standing up.”⁴

Historical accounts – that preferred by debunkers – of Bien Boa sometimes refer to it as a hoax admitted to by an Arab coachman, who claimed to have “played the ghost” for the medium, giving a demonstration to newspapermen as to how he pulled it off. Responding to this story, Richet pointed out that the coachman had been dismissed by Marthe Béraud’s father for theft. “The general public, blinded by ignoble newspaper tales, imagined that the fraud had been exposed,” Richet wrote. “All that was really proved was: that an Arab thief could lie impudently, that he could put on a sheet, could appear thus on a stage, and could get a doctor to endorse his lies.”⁵

Richet witnessed many strange materializations, some of them appearing like cardboard cutouts. While many laughed at the photos of these materializations, wondering how any scientist could take them seriously, Richet responded: “The fact of the appearance of flat images rather than of forms in relief is no evidence of trickery. 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 from the cloudy substance.”⁶

Further discussing the “cloudy substance,” or ectoplasm, Richet mentioned that there are stages in the materialization process. “[First,] a whitish steam, perhaps luminous, taking the shape of gauze or muslin, in which there develops a hand or an arm that gradually gains consistency. This ectoplasm makes personal movements. It creeps, rises from the ground, and puts forth tentacles like an amoeba. It is not always connected with the body of the medium but usually emanates from her, and is connected with her.”⁷ The flat materializations, he explained, came in

the rudimentary phase, a sort of rough draft in the phase of building up.

That ectoplasm is a scientific fact, Richet had no doubt, though he called it "absurd." "Spiritualists have blamed me for using this word 'absurd' and have not been able to understand that to admit the reality of these phenomena was to me an actual pain," he explained his position. "But to ask a physiologist, a physicist, or a chemist to admit that a form that has a circulation of blood, warmth, and muscles, that exhales carbonic acid, has weight, speaks, and thinks, can issue from a human body is to ask of him an intellectual effort that is really painful. Yes, it is absurd, but no matter – it is true."⁸

While clearly accepting the reality of mediumship and other psychic phenomena, Richet remained skeptical as to whether the evidence suggested spirits and survival. He said he would not allow himself to be blinded by rationalism and that he opposed the spiritist hypothesis half-heartedly because he was unable to bring forward any wholly satisfactory counter-theory. "In very many cases the spiritist hypothesis is obviously absurd – absurd because it is superfluous – and

again absurd because it assumes that human beings of very moderate intelligence survive the destruction of the brain," he stated his position. "All the same, in certain cases – rare indeed, but whose significance I do not disguise – there are, apparently at least, intelligent and reasoned intentions, forces, and wills in the phenomena produced; and the power has all the character of extraneous energy."⁹

Richet reasoned that the spirit explanation was much the simplest, but he said that he refused to infer spirits. Rather, he chose to infer that the human personality has both material and psychological powers that science did not yet understand. While publicly, he leaned toward a materialistic explanation, privately, Sir Oliver Lodge, his friend, said after Richet's death, he accepted the spirit hypothesis as the best explanation.



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¹ Richet, Charles, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, W. Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1923 p. 31

² _____, p. 515

³ _____, p. 34

⁴ _____, pp. 505-506

⁵ _____, p. 505

⁶ _____, p. 514

⁷ _____, p. 523

⁸ _____, p. 544

⁹ _____, p. 596