

## COMMENTARY

### Selected Aspects of Carlos Mirabelli's Mediumship

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Abstract—In the present issue of this *Journal*, Stephen Braude summarized the enigmatic case of Brazilian medium Carlos Mirabelli, who, like many other physical mediums, was hailed as an outstanding genuine medium by some and regarded as a complete fraud by others. In this article, I present an overview on two aspects of the Mirabelli mediumship. First, I introduce historical material that relates to the context of the somewhat famous visit of biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch at Mirabelli's in 1928, along with a few comments from my side; and I will then present two apparently little-known accounts of sittings that Mirabelli held in 1930 and 1935 in New York.

#### A Commentary on Hans Driesch's Sitting with Carlos Mirabelli in 1928

After Albert von Schrenck-Notzing published a German summary of a Portuguese book entitled *O Medium Mirabelli* (Mikulasch 1926, Schrenck-Notzing 1927), discussions about Mirabelli commenced in Germany. For example, in a radio talk held on December 13, 1927, Max Dessoir stated that he received a letter from a woman who claimed that Mirabelli, who was now often discussed in periodicals, had already been exposed as a swindler.<sup>1</sup> According to this woman, Mirabelli was caught faking during a sitting her husband attended—but apparently no further details were given. This commentary by Dessoir was cited in an article by Christoph Schröder (1928), then editor of the German parapsychological journal *Zeitschrift für Psychische Forschung*. Schröder, who was on unfriendly terms with Dessoir, then presented a summary of the Mirabelli sitting on August 2, 1928—the “famous” sitting that Hans Driesch had attended when he visited Brazil and Argentina (Driesch 1930, 1951, see also Braude in this issue). Schröder's article contained the rather short séance protocol, the text of which was provided by Bernardo Pritze, a German-born director of the exchange department of the Transatlantic German Bank in São Paulo (de Goes 1937:210), in whose small villa in a suburb of São Paulo the sitting took place (Figure 1). Pritze added a few personal remarks on the events witnessed.



**Figure 1. Carlos Mirabelli (left) and Eurico de Goes in the garden of Bernardo and Brigida Pritze's villa, in which the sitting with Hans Driesch took place on August 2, 1928.** (Photo taken from de Goes 1937, and digitally revamped by M. Nahm.)

Apparently, Pritze had a keen interest in parapsychology. He visited Schröder and also Driesch earlier in 1928, and was also in contact with Schrenck-Notzing. Thereafter, he aimed at establishing contact with Mirabelli. Obviously he succeeded, and he arranged a rather informal “sitting” with Mirabelli in August for himself, Driesch, and both their wives.

Pritze seemed to be especially impressed by the ostensible apport phenomena that occurred in his home. He briefly recounted several examples in his letter to Schröder, stressing that at least one object must have come out of a locked drawer. Moreover, he confirmed that, as stated in the séance protocol, his wife Brigida Pritze saw an apparition of a woman who appeared at the request of Mirabelli. Although it seemed to be only vaguely visible, Mrs. Pritze claimed that she could clearly distinguish the

moving apparition's dark dress and white overcoat. However, this apparition was only seen by her. Only she and Driesch were in the room in which it appeared, but Driesch stated he didn't see it (without giving possible reasons why). Brigida Pritze published the séance protocol in another parapsychological journal as well, along with a few personal comments from her side (Brigida Pritze 1928). The phenomenon that impressed Driesch most, a seemingly inexplicable movement of two folding doors, was originally not mentioned in the séance protocol, but was added in a footnote by Driesch. He described this event in more detail later (Driesch 1930, 1951). Also, in his autobiography, Driesch stated that after several glass bottles had mysteriously leaned forward and backward a number of times in full light, he immediately stepped between these bottles and Mirabelli, but that there were no threads or wires (Driesch 1951). He had no idea how Mirabelli could have faked these object movements.

In her article, Brigida Pritze (1928) described other telekineses and apport phenomena that were observed on September 21, 1928. For example, during the morning of this day, the spectacles of Mrs. Pritze were transported 10–12 km from their villa to the house of Eurico de Goes, where Mirabelli was staying. He had not been to the Pritzes' house for several days (see also de Goes 1937:63).<sup>2</sup> Later on this day, Bernardo Pritze, Eurico de Goes, Mirabelli and his wife, and the poet and diplomat Sir Douglas Ainslie arrived at the Pritze's villa to hold a sitting. Yet, when they approached its entrance, Mirabelli seemed to become possessed by a spirit, and prevented them from entering the house. He announced that a small clock owned by Ainslie, which had allegedly been dematerialized in Ainslie's hotel room approximately 10 km away the evening before, would materialize in the corridor inside the house. When Ainsley entered the house alone to look for his clock, he indeed found it in the corridor as Mirabelli had announced (see also de Goes 1937:62).

The Pritzes met Mirabelli on a few more occasions, and experienced a number of other puzzling apport phenomena that often entailed the appearance of objects that were usually stored in locked locations. For instance, when they paid Mirabelli an unexpected and unannounced visit at his home (approximately 60 km from their villa), Mirabelli claimed that a revolver of the brand "Browning" was soon to materialize. Shortly after, such a revolver fell down next to the feet of Mr. Pritze, to whom it belonged. It had been stored in a locked cupboard in his home (de Goes 1937:184). Similarly, when they drove in their car together with Mirabelli, various objects would appear inside the car. Some of them had been stored in locked drawers, the keys for which were in the possession of Mr. Pritze (de Goes 1937:212).

Although both Pritztes sympathized with spiritist attitudes, they retained a critical attitude. In a short article, Bernardo Pritze explained why he, in agreement with Pascal Forthuny, with whom he corresponded, didn't think that the personalities communicating through Mirabelli were who they claimed to be, but that they were largely produced by the medium's subconscious mind (Bernardo Pritze 1929). When May Walker, a wealthy member of the British Society for Psychical Research (Walther 1955, 1960), tried to locate Mirabelli in January 1934 and also contacted the Pritztes, they responded that they had not been in touch with Mirabelli for three or four years. Thus, it seems, they were only in contact with Mirabelli for a relatively short time.

In contrast to the Pritztes, Driesch remained skeptical regarding the apports that occurred at their sitting. In his report, he stated that he considered them "far from convincing; for I never saw the path of the apported object in the air, but only saw it when it had reached the ground. And Mirabelli was in a large overcoat with enormous pockets" (Driesch 1930:487). However, judging by the material presented by the Pritztes and Eurico de Goes, his suspicions regarding the ostensible apport phenomena might have been exaggerated.<sup>3</sup> Driesch was known to be cautious when it came to accepting the reality of physical phenomena of mediumship, but some of the dismissive statements in the concluding section of his account (Driesch 1930) seem inappropriate. Apparently, they rested to a considerable degree on his inability to find out who had published the book *O Medium Mirabelli* in 1926, because Schrenck-Notzing didn't include Mikulasch's name in his German summary (Schrenck-Notzing 1927).<sup>4</sup> Driesch (1930) claimed that he asked the Pritztes and an "intimate friend of Mirabelli's" about the authorship of this book, but that they didn't know about it. As a consequence, Driesch mused with regard to the authentication of the records contained therein that Mirabelli might have written the book himself, complained about the weakness of the phenomena he was able to observe in comparison to those described in the book, and stated that "everything must absolutely remain *in dubio*" (Driesch 1930:487).

But, if the authorship of this book was so important for Driesch, why didn't he ask Mirabelli himself about its authorship? And, given that he was interested in the authentication of the available records: Why didn't he seek much earlier before his visit to Brazil to establish contact with persons who knew Mirabelli, or, in case this was too difficult, also later via Mr. Pritze, Mirabelli himself, or the latter's "intimate friend"? It also remains obscure why Driesch built his skepticism additionally on the argument that neither Mr. Pritze nor Mirabelli's "intimate friend" had seen the phenomena described in Mikulasch's book. Regarding Mr. Pritze, it is obvious that he,

like Driesch himself, didn't know Mirabelli before summer 1928. Judging by the sources available, it seems very likely that the sitting on August 2, 1928, was also the Pritzes' first sitting with Mirabelli. And, curiously, the "intimate friend" mentioned by Driesch must have been nobody else than Eurico de Goes, who indeed had known Mirabelli since about 1917 (de Goes 1937), and who frequently cited Mikulasch's book in his own book to be published in 1937.<sup>5</sup> Driesch even met Mirabelli, Mr. Pritze, and de Goes again in October 1928 (Driesch 1951). When May Walker met with de Goes during her visit to São Paulo, she stated that she had a long and interesting talk with him, and that he, as might be expected, related "all sorts of wonders concerning materializations and levitations" to her (Walker 1934:74).

In any case, according to Mikulasch (1926), of 110 sittings held for physical phenomena, 47 were negative, and 35 of these negative sittings were held in the facilities of the Cesar Lombroso Academy of Psychical Studies that was founded to investigate Mirabelli's mediumistic abilities.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, it was not uncommon that Mirabelli's sittings for physical phenomena were rather uneventful even when they were held in a supportive environment. And, according to Bernardo Pritze (Schröder 1928), Mirabelli was sickly for an extended period in 1928, which might have contributed to the production of comparably weak phenomena during this year. Be that as it may, Driesch was well aware that the proven reality of phenomena of physical mediumship would bear an enormous significance for philosophy and natural sciences. Thus, he frequently urged parapsychologists to investigate them under scientifically satisfying conditions. This also applied to Mirabelli. Even though he considered him a partial fraud, he was impressed enough by what he witnessed to recommend further studies with him (Driesch 1930).

### **Carlos Mirabelli in New York**

In the following, I briefly summarize the events of two apparently little-known sittings that Mirabelli held in New York. Unfortunately, particularly the first report is unduly short, as is so often the case with Mirabelli. Still, the occurrences described match the descriptions of other remarkable physical phenomena presented especially by Mikulasch (1926) and de Goes (1937). Still, provided these reports are not completely invented, they show that Mirabelli accepted invitations from foreign academics—apparently including skeptical ones.

The first of the sittings in New York took place in 1930. It was first described in the Italian journal *Mondo Occulto* (Rosacroce 1930), and then reprinted in Italian by de Goes (1937:187). According to this report, Mirabelli was invited by a group of university professors in New York,

among them several physicians, to hold a controlled séance in full light at 3 p.m. in the facilities of an Institute for Chemistry. Photographic equipment was mounted. After a few minutes, during which he looked into a mirror, Mirabelli fell into trance. In the middle of the room, a blurred smoke-like column of about one meter height formed, a few meters away from the medium. This contour-less shape then condensed and formed a single and very white arm, as if it was formed out of the nebulous mass, which slowly vanished. It was the arm of a woman. One finger wore a ring. Suddenly, the ring disengaged from the finger, fell down, and rolled underneath a small table. Immediately thereafter, the arm began to dissolve again into the nebulous shape, which grew ever more transparent and disappeared. This phenomenon took six minutes and was photographed by two cameras. There were no other materializations during this sitting. The ring turned out to be a golden wedding ring with the inscription “J. Irving” on its inside. Indeed, one of the sitters was an industrialist named “John Irving,” and he had lost his young wife three years ago in an automobile accident after being married to her for two years. Irving attested that the wedding ring his wife was buried with was identical to the ring that mysteriously dropped from the finger of the materialized arm. It is stated that this sitting left a deep impression on all sitters, including the skeptical ones.

The other sitting Mirabelli was reported having held in New York took place in 1935. Its account was first published by a “special correspondent” from New York in an Austrian periodical, *Neues Wiener Journal*, on March 25, 1935 (Anonymous 1935), and was summarized in Hans Gerloff’s book about Mirabelli (1960).<sup>7</sup> The sitting was held in the house of a physician named Dr. Schelders at 3 p.m. in full light, and was additionally attended by the latter’s wife and 11 guests who were friends. The salon, in which the sitting was to take place, was cleared except for the necessary chairs, a small table, and two cinematographic cameras. Mirabelli sat in an armchair, chatted with the sitters, and eventually gazed into a small crystal ball he brought with him, until after about five minutes he seemed to fall into a trance-like state. After about ten more minutes, a thin smoke-like column appeared in close vicinity to the medium, as if it came out of the wooden floor next to him. Within a very short time, however, this smoky mass seemed to condense and it assumed the shape of an elderly man dressed in damaged clothing. He appeared embarrassed to find himself among a group people who stared at him, and, vice versa, the sitters appeared embarrassed by the sudden appearance of a man who looked perfectly human—were it not that he appeared among them in a rather unusual manner. The first person who dared to break the uncomfortable silence was an advocate by the name of J. Johnson who asked the apparition for his name and whereabouts.

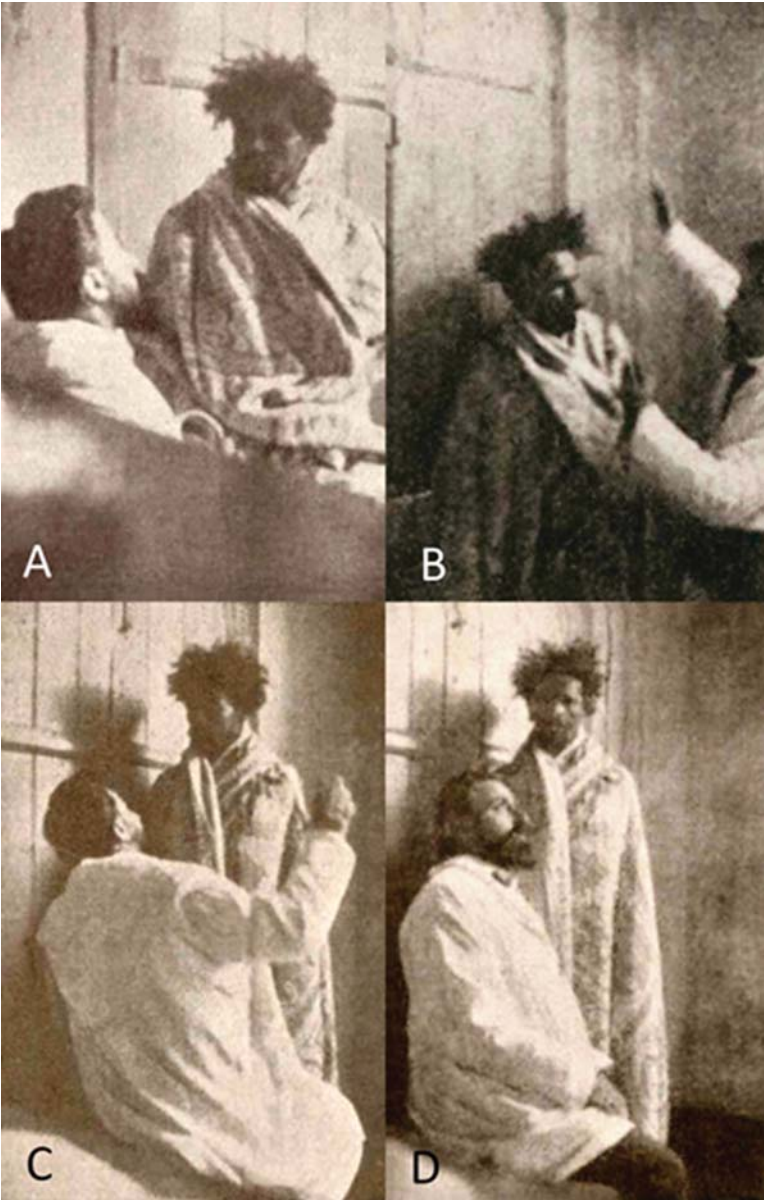
Uncertainly, he replied that he didn't know how he came here and that he didn't belong here. Yet, he stated that his name was John Ronaldson, and that he was born on February 23, 1875, in Saint Louis, thereafter spending most of his time in New York. He claimed he killed someone named Carlington and was then sent to prison. A judge named Valentin Mewes took a drinking glass from the small table and asked the apparition to leave the fingerprints of his right hand as a souvenir, which he did. When asked where he lived after his time in prison, Mirabelli's body, which had lain motionless on his chair until now, cramped, and the apparition seemed to lose his feet and legs, and to hover in the air.<sup>8</sup> It was then covered by a smoke-like column, which seemed to dissolve after several minutes until nothing was left. Two physicians, Drs. Ercole and Hutchinson, claimed that the phenomenon must have been a collective hallucination. However, the employed cameras captured the entire process of Ronaldson's appearance, and thus proved them wrong.

Valentin Mewes took the glass with the fingerprints with him, photographed them, and asked the police records department for their identification. The reply came after 14 days: They belonged to a certain John Ronaldson who was born in Saint Louis in 1875, and who was sentenced to imprisonment on December 21, 1907, due to holdup murder. He died of pneumonia in prison in 1911. Ronaldson had a lesion on his right thumb, and this lesion was also visible on the fingerprints taken at the sitting.

### **Concluding Comment**

Certainly, such video material would be a valuable documentation of Mirabelli's mediumship. Gerloff (1960:154) stated that he would try to locate it, but, since he never spoke of it again in later publications when mentioning Mirabelli, it seems he was not successful. However, without extensive, rigorous additional documentation, even such video material would be of comparably little persuasive power for those who doubt the reality of physical phenomena of this magnitude. At least Mikulasch and de Goes presented consecutive series of photographs of supposed apparitions along with reports of witnesses, but these seem to exert little impact even in parapsychological circles (e.g., Figure 2). Be that as it may: With regard to judging Mirabelli's mediumship, we are left with only two options: First, his mediumship constitutes the most spectacular fraud within the history of spiritualistic mediumship, because it must have involved dozens of confederates who impersonated false apparitions in full light, from little children to old men and women who originated from various cultural backgrounds, and it also must have required numerous deceitful investigators who came and went throughout the years, and hundreds of





**Figure 2.** Four photographs of a “Moroccan” apparition. (A), (C), and (D) are taken from Mikulasch (1926) and (B) from de Goes (1937). (The photos were digitally revamped by M. Nahm.)



lying witnesses from all social strata—and all of these people must have acted in mutual agreement at different locations and cities, for decades. Or, second, Mirabelli was the most spectacular medium in the history of spiritualistic mediumship, regardless of whether he resorted to fraud on occasion or not. Given these drastic alternatives, it appears comprehensible if one prefers to sit on the fence, perhaps with a bias to this or to that side, and continue to wonder and ponder about this astonishing man and his abilities.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Max Dessoir was an influential driver of the development of early psychology in Germany during the late 19th century, and is also known for coining the term “Parapsychologie” in 1889. For more information on Dessoir, see, e.g., Sommer (2013).
- <sup>2</sup> de Goes’ 1937 book is available at <http://bvespirita.com/Livros2-P.html> with pagination differing from the original book. The page numbers used in the present article refer to the online version of this book.
- <sup>3</sup> The same might apply to Besterman’s negative appraisal of Mirabelli’s apport phenomena that occurred when he participated in several sittings with him (Besterman 1935; for a summary, see Braude, this issue). Whilst Besterman claimed that they were undoubtedly all faked, especially the coin apports, the original sitting protocols (which Besterman signed) mention, for example, that a coin was seen to levitate from the hand of a Mrs. Olga, and a Dr. Alvaro stated he saw a coin, which ended up in a rear pocket of a Mr. Fry, travel through the air (de Goes 1937:107f, Gerloff 1960:123).
- <sup>4</sup> Perhaps Driesch overlooked that the 1927 issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, the Society he was the president of in 1926/1927, referred to Rodolpho Mikulasch as the publisher of this book on page 127, and indirectly also on page 144 (which even contains a reference to Driesch himself, albeit in another context). In any case, on the second title page of the book in question, Rodolpho Mikulasch, a General Secretary of the *Cesar Lombroso Academy of Psychical Studies* (Mikulasch 1926:31, compare Gerloff 1960), is explicitly given as its editor. Later, Mikulasch became the prefect of the city São Vicente (Gerloff 1960).
- <sup>5</sup> That this “intimate friend” must have been Eurico de Goes is suggested by his profession. Driesch (1930:487) stated that he was “the overseer of the Town Library of São Paulo” and its “chief librarian” (Driesch 1951:259), which is in accordance with de Goes (1937) and Walker’s (1934) descriptions of his profession.
- <sup>6</sup> See also the translation by Gerloff (1960:52). In the translated summary

published by Schrenck-Notzing (1927), it is stated that 35 negative sittings were held *outside* the facilities of the Academy, but the original text by Mikulasch (1926) states they were held *within* these facilities.

- <sup>7</sup> This treatise about Mirabelli by Hans Gerloff contains a translation of the entire book of Mikulasch (1926) as well as translated excerpts of other Portuguese sources about Mirabelli, among them the séance protocols of the sittings with Besterman, which are included in de Goes (1937). Gerloff was convinced that the phenomena of Mirabelli were genuine, and he advanced severe accusations against Western parapsychologists, most notably against Besterman. He was utterly disappointed that they, in his opinion, carelessly missed the unique chance to scrutinize Mirabelli's mediumship in a seriously scientific manner.
- <sup>8</sup> Sometimes, Mirabelli's movements were synchronized with those of the apparitions. For example, whenever the apparition of the little daughter of Dr. Ganimedes de Souza moved (when floating in the air toward the end of her appearance in full light), the arms of the entranced Mirabelli jolted as if in nervous tremor (Mikulasch 1926:56, see also Gerloff 1960:73).

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