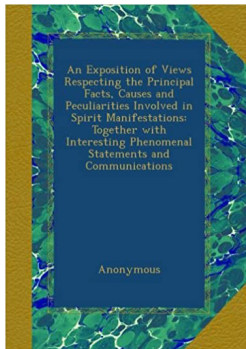


BOOK REVIEW

An Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes, and Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations

Michael Tymn
metgat@aol.com



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More than thirty years before the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded, some serious psychical research was going on, as evidenced by this 1852 book. Author Adin Ballou (1803-1890), a Unitarian minister, was considering subconscious influences and other distortions in the messages coming through mediums when Frederic W. H. Myers and William James, two of the SPR pioneers, were still in grade school. “I believe that departed spirits cause *many* of these phenomena, but not all of them,” he stated after summarizing a myriad of both physical and mental mediumistic phenomena witnessed by him and many others in the years immediately following the advent of what came to be called ‘Spiritualism’. “I believe that spirits in the flesh, i.e., the mind of the Medium, or the minds of the persons surrounding the Medium, *sometimes* thwart, warp, peculiarize, or modify the manifestations and communications made. I also believe that *low* and very *imperfect* departed spirits sometimes manifest themselves (pp. 14-15).

Ballou also observed that mediums, in their “crude, incipient state, gave forth communications in accordance with their own *prejudices, wishes, or wills*, and very contrary ones to those generally received, but that they may outgrow their defects and become reliable” (p. 65).

Remembered primarily as an influential pacifist and abolitionist, Ballou emerges as possibly the first dedicated psychical researcher, even before Judge John Edmonds, whose book *Spiritualism*, co-authored with George T. Dexter, M.D., was published in 1853. Edmonds states that he began his investigation in January 1851, but Ballou’s reports, while not giving dates, suggest he started a little earlier than Edmonds.

Ordained as a Universalist minister in December 1824, Ballou first served in Milford, Massachusetts, and New York City. As a result of disagreements in the hierarchy of the Universalist Church, Ballou, and several other ministers formed a new denomination, the Massachusetts Association of Universal Restorations (MAUR), but conflicting ideals within that group prompted Ballou, in 1831, to accept a call to serve as a Unitarian minister, a position in which he focused most of his energies on social reform.

Ballou recorded that he witnessed a myriad of both physical and mental phenomena, including levitations, materializations, apports, and communication with unseen intelligences, the latter from light taps to heavy pounding and even by direct writing with a plumbago pencil, i.e., no visible hand holding the pencil. He further reported that he sat and conversed with the “authors” of the sounds and motions for hours, asking questions and receiving answers, usually by the alphabet being spelled out with a knock at the proper letter, “... all by a slow process, indeed, but with every possible demonstration of intelligence, though not without incidental misapprehensions and mistakes. I have witnessed the asking of mental questions by inquirers, who received prompt and correct answers as when the questions were asked audibly to the cognition of the Me-



dium" (p. 49).

Long before Professor Charles Richet gave the name "ectoplasm" to the strange substance emitted by mediums, Ballou called it *spiricity*. "It is partly of the same substance with individual soul-spirits, constitutes their congenial atmosphere, and serves as the principal element of intercommunication," he explained. "They can inhale and absorb it, exhale and radiate it, impregnate, it with their peculiarities of *thought, affection, and will*, and thus transmit influences to inconceivable distances, nay, transport their preceptive consciousness so as to be virtually present anywhere within their permitted range of existence." (pp. 17-18) However, he also observed a wide range in the quality of the phenomena and the degree of strength of the mediums. "I have found that some Media were so imperfect, or had been so sophisticated by the management of overruling minds, that scarcely any reliance could be placed on what purported to come through their mediumship. Others, especially *tipping and hand-moved Media*, are frequently so nervous, doubtfully balanced, and peculiarly affected that one knows not what to depend on. But it remains true that there are clear, passive, independent Media, worthy of all the reliances that ought ever to be placed in persons sustaining such a relation to the spirit world" (p. 63).

Ballou went on to say that he had seen a medium "gently magnetized and thrown into a trance in one minute by the imperceptible influence of the spirits." The spirits then used her organs of speech and answered numerous questions instead of responding with the usual raps. "That these trances were not superinduced by mortal agency, and were not *feigned* but *real*, I am as certain as I can be of anything not absolutely beyond the possibility of mistake," he wrote (p. 52). He theorized that not one in 50 mediums has developed spiricity to be a clear intellectual medium.

"The Medium is a sort of amanuensis, translator, or interpreter of the spirit's leading ideas," he continued. "In this character, Media will exhibit, in various degrees, the defects of their own respective rhetoric. Unless their perspicuity, force, and command of language be equal to that of the mind communicating through them, the same result will follow, as when an accomplished mind in the flesh is obliged to write or speak through a clumsy amanuensis, translator, or interpreter" (pp. 113-114).

Ballou wondered why messages coming through mediums sometimes reflected their own ideas. "In such cases, the mediums are of recent development and very imperfect, or else, for the time being, are in an impassive, feverish state, greatly influenced by positive minds near them," he opined. "These exercise a strong physical influence, and either suspend or warp and deflect the action of

the spirit attempting to respond" (p. 112).

Even though names had not been given to the theories later called Secondary Personality and Super-Psi, or Living-Agent Psi, Ballou seems to have mostly considered them as "unconscious clairvoyance." He asks, "How can an unconscious, unorganized element understand specific questions? How transmit itself to the particular place, ascertain important facts, return and express them by rappings? How or why pretend to be a particular person – a departed spirit – with a particular name? Is this natural, rational, consistent, or at all probable?" (p. 26). He concluded that departed spirits were a much more rational explanation than such far-fetched theories relating to the subconscious.

Nevertheless, there were discrepancies and contradictions in the information coming from the spirits. "Sometimes it has been found that if the Medium was strongly prejudiced, or was overawed by associates of that character, the teachings of the first few weeks were biased considerably by those influences," he explained, "whereas afterwards, when the communications seemed to be made more freely and independently of the Medium's mind, these peculiarities ceased, and the doctrines attested became accordant with the general current" (p. 54).

Some of the experiences, he reported, were clearly beyond trickery. "I have requested what purported to be the spirit of a friend many years deceased, to go to a particular place, several miles distant from that of the sitting, and to bring me back intelligence respecting the then health and doings of a certain relative well-known to the parties. In three minutes of time, the intelligence was obtained, numerous particulars given, some of them rather improbable, but every one exactly confirmed the next day, by personal inquiries made for that purpose" (p. 50).

Ballou noted that a number of mediums had been discredited because the words supposedly coming from great minds in the spirit world were not consistent with their modes of expression when in the earth life. He concluded that these great minds in the spirit world, realizing how difficult it is to find a medium with the necessary intellectual capacity to convey their message, concerned themselves more with communicating fundamental principles and ideas than with the verbiage. "I read communications purporting to come from these illustrious sources with a good deal of distrust," he offered. "Yet, I cannot doubt that some of them are substantially authentic and reliable. These, however, are not all invulnerable to the objection. A part of them exhibit the defects complained of. How is this to be accounted for? By making due allowances for the imperfection of the Media" (p. 113).

Ballou also claimed that communications sometimes

came from purported spirits of the dead, but it turned out that the person represented was still alive in the flesh. "What passes through such Media must be greatly liable to the influences of *undeparted* spirits," he wrote. "Their own prejudices, will, imagination, low ideas, perverse sentiments, and peculiar absurdities of interior conception, must bias and characterize the communication, which any spirits should attempt to make through them. Mesmeric and psychological influences, from controlling minds near them, would be likely to have the same effect. Hence the communications, even of a decent and well-meaning *departed* spirit, might come out in an awkward translation – something quite unlike what was intended" (p. 69).

He recalled a situation in which a spirit came and communicated, purporting to be a well-known friend living in a distant country and still in the flesh. The information communicated was clearly unknown to the Medium, thus ruling out fraud as well as the theory that the mind of the Medium created it. He further concluded that mischievous spirits sometimes impersonated living people. Moreover, he concluded that some *undeparted* spirits had the ability to move objects by *will*-power, but that departed spirits had a "hand" in most phenomena of this nature. "As a believer in the exertion of will-power by departed spirits, there is no necessity for my utterly denying the existence of such power in *undeparted* ones," he explained his position (p. 121).

Among the consistent "teachings" of the spirits recorded by Ballou were:

* There are seven spirit spheres, or circles, inferior to the heavenly or celestial spheres, and each sphere or circle has several degrees. Man progresses through these spheres, drawing nearer and nearer to God, or nearer to the divine standard of perfection.

* Death does not change man's real charac-

ter, nor his proper spirit sphere, nor his capability to make progress, nor the laws of progress.

* Many spirits remain very long in the lower spheres, but while they are "spirits in prison," there is no such place or state as a hell of unmitigated, hopeless mercy.

* God, angels, and all the higher spirits are forever seeking the elevation of the inferior spirits by all just, wise, and appropriate means.

* Spirits in the higher spheres are employed in three general exercises: 1) in striving after a more perfect knowledge of and communication with God, whom they cannot see there any more than here, as a personal being, but only in spirit by faith and intuition; 2) in study, self-examination, contemplations of truth, and acquainting themselves with all useful knowledge attainable to them; 3) in ministering to struggling spirits on earth and in the lower spheres – endeavoring to elevate and bless them.

* Spirits in any circle can descend into all the circles below their own, but cannot, except by special permission, ascend into a higher sphere until qualified by spiritual progress. (pp. 55-59)

There was a time, Ballou remembered, when he was of a very skeptical mindset regarding all the phenomena he had heard about. "But I have seen too much that my native ignorance deemed impossible, not to have been rendered modest in my skepticism. Truth is truth, in spite of all ignorance and unbelief. And there is a vast ocean of truths, which man will have to learn sooner or later" (p. 213).

If Myers, James, Hodgson, Lodge, Hyslop, and other early leaders of the SPR were aware of Ballou's research, it is difficult to find it in their reports. Those reading the SPR records might assume that the ideas set forth by Ballou originated with the SPR research forty or fifty years later.