



THE MEDIUMSHIP OF ROBERTO SETTI

PIERO CALVI-PARISETTI & ENRICO RUGGINI

ABSTRACT

During a period spanning over 37 years, Roberto Setti (1930–1984), a surveyor employed by the city council in Florence (Italy), was at the centre of extraordinary manifestations of mental and physical mediumship regularly reported by hundreds of reliable witnesses. During the same period, the entranced Setti also channelled, through the direct voice method, a number of purported spiritually advanced entities known as *the Masters*, whose utterances were recorded on tape, transcribed, and published almost in their entirety, amounting to what is possibly the largest and most detailed record available for such a particular form of anomalous information reception. The channelled information amounts to an extremely complex, articulated, and detailed edifice of philosophical, spiritual, moral, and cosmogonic thought—a doctrine in the broadest sense, which many authors have considered comparable to the teachings of great masters of monistic idealism such as Sri Aurobindo, Nisargadatta Maharaj, or Ramana Maharshi. This paper briefly reviews the life and personality of the medium, describes the format and phenomenology of the séances, discusses some features of the available recordings, and considers the surprisingly limited sceptical criticism that has been levelled over the years. The paper also attempts to provide a summary of the key elements of the vast body of philosophical thought allegedly channelled from the Masters.

INTRODUCTION

Parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo (1975) differentiates mediumship (bringing through spirits of the dead specifically to communicate with their relatives) from channelling (bringing through some sort of intelligence, the nature undefined, whose purpose is to promote spiritual teachings and philosophical discussion). During nearly four decades, Florentine Roberto Setti did both things, at a level which allows very few—if any—comparisons, whilst maintaining conditions of strict anonymity. Reports of the extraordinary physical phenomena regularly occurring during séances and the growing body of spiritual and philosophical teachings allegedly originating from higher entities known as ‘the Masters’ were published by the small group of regular séance participants under the name of Cerchio Firenze 77.¹ The books gained considerable popularity and

1. As explained in greater detail in a later section, the name Cerchio Firenze 77 is essentially a play on words regarding the medium’s name.

Cerchio Firenze 77 is argued to have been, by far, the most famous group among those who participated in the revival of spiritualist culture in 20th century Italy (Baroni, 2011). Surprisingly, this experience is all but unknown to the English-speaking specialist public. The only reference to possible international exposure came from a private conversation with one of the authors, in which Renato Del Favero, briefly a member of Cerchio Firenze 77, related that the late Prof. Ian Stevenson had participated in one of the Setti séances. This remains anecdotal, however, as the present authors were not able to trace any published report and enquiries to the University of Virginia yielded no results. This paper is offered as a contribution to the rarefied field study of the phenomena of mediumship and channelling in non-anglophone contexts.

LIFE AND PERSONALITY

Biographical details about the life of Roberto Setti are found in a variety of sources, all in Italian. The information presented here is compiled based on the only three audio interviews given by the medium himself (one, by renowned radio journalist Pietro Cimatti, was broadcast on Italian national radio in 1980²), from the brief biographical note written by the medium's sister, Luciana Campani Setti, as the preface to the last book published under the name of Cerchio Firenze 77 (1984), and from a magazine article from the same author (Campani Setti, 1996).

Apart from what was to manifest, at age 16, as an extraordinary mediumistic gift, nothing in the life of Roberto Setti appears out of the ordinary or otherwise remarkable. He was born in Florence on 7 November 1930, the third child of working-class parents. He enjoyed a loving and caring family environment, growing into an endearing if somewhat shy child, with friends, interests, and activities typical of his age.

The events connected with the initial manifestation of his psychical abilities, detailed in the next section, had no impact at all on the way he lived his life. He finished high school at age 19, qualifying as a surveyor. He felt regret for having followed that particular course of study, himself feeling more inclined towards mathematics and, in particular, accountancy. Soon after leaving high school, he found employment as a surveyor in a small building company. Much to his satisfaction, he was given responsibilities over administration and accountancy rather than surveying matters. About a decade later, in 1960, he became an employee of Florence city council, where he held a relatively low-grade position in the city planning department until the early 1980s. His daily tasks required a rather detailed knowledge of the intricacies of legislation concerning urban planning, one he had not acquired through his studies and the origin of which he could not explain. He was reportedly often consulted on such legal matters

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnEf92Nu-k0&t=276D> (accessed 26 October 2024).

by colleagues and superiors in the department. His co-workers regarded him as an understated, dutiful, serious but friendly and pleasant colleague.

It is important to stress that, according to himself, his family and anyone who spoke or wrote about him, Roberto Setti never had an interest in philosophy, let alone metaphysics or Eastern spiritual traditions—he never studied or even read about such subjects. His education and employment history simply cannot account for the heights of philosophical and spiritual thought his trance mediumship produced during more than 37 years.

In the late 1970s, the early signs of a degenerative neurological disease manifested with weakness of the lower limbs and paraesthesia. The condition deteriorated quickly and, by early 1981, he was confined to a wheelchair. He died on 29 February 1984.

A tall, slim, handsome man, Setti never married. He was also quite reserved about any intimate relationship he may have had in his youth. In his adult life, he remained very close to his sister and immediate family, and enjoyed the company of a few close friends.

Anybody who, after having been in contact with him, described the personality of Roberto Setti, talked about a quiet, ordinary, rather private person who was uncomfortable with being at the centre of attention. In particular, he never wanted the issue of his mediumship to be known outside the relatively small circle of family, friends, and acquaintances that formed around his séances and was later to be known as Cerchio Firenze 77. In the preface of another book, an anonymous member of the group writes,

Our medium not only always refused any kind of compensation for his work but was also strongly opposed to being identified as the conduit for these marvellous phenomena—something anybody would love to be the instrument for. He dedicated his life to the duties shown to him by his mediumship, living a simple and private life. Nobody in his workplace was remotely aware of his mediumship. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p. 21)

True to this stance, Setti made sure that his name was never mentioned in any of the books which were published over the years under the name Cerchio Firenze 77. The books consist of verbatim transcriptions of the communications received from the various alleged discarnate entities he channelled, and of signed statements from séance participants, mostly detailing physical mediumship manifestations they had witnessed. Only during the last two years of his life, when he was severely weakened by the disease, did Setti accept to give the already mentioned three interviews, in which he was identified as the medium at the centre of the extraordinary happenings which were, by then, quite well known by the interested public in Italy.

The three interviews provide a fascinating insight into the psychology of the medium. Speaking softly, with a heavy Tuscan accent and the occasional dialect expression, Setti conveys to the listener precisely the sense of meek gentleness

he was known for. One of the authors of this paper was particularly struck by one detail: when asked about his dream life, Setti reported that most of his dreams were the usual mix of reality, memories, and fantasy, and described them as mostly senseless. The only recurring dream was one in which he was ecstatic for having acquired one of the electronic tubes he so much coveted when, as a boy, he loved to dabble with crystal radio circuits and which he couldn't afford at the time. One can hear the amazement and the enthusiasm, as they would have been felt by a young boy—the sheer innocence coming through. This is an interesting dream life for somebody who, when entranced, “truly speaks like a great Master, at the level of Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna and the like” (Philosopher Giulio Cogni writing in *Cerchio Firenze* 77, 1978, p. 11).

MEDIUMSHIP AND CHANNELLING

The episode which first revealed Roberto Setti's gift of mediumship happened in 1946. At the time, he was living with his parents and older sister, Luciana. In early April, his older brother, Ruggero, who had survived the war, was tragically killed. The mother, deeply distraught, cannot accept the idea that Ruggero simply ceased to exist, that it will be impossible to hear from him ever again. Remembering the experience of an auntie, who had had an evidential sitting with a medium in Bologna years before, and against advice from the rest of the family, Roberto's mother decides to organize a séance to try to contact Ruggero. Attempting to replicate the procedure the auntie had been through in Bologna, seven members of the Setti family come together in the afternoon of 28 May. They sit around a low wooden table, placing their fingertips on the top. After a few minutes, the table levitates, wobbles, then rises so high that the participants lose touch with it. Then it falls back down and taps repeatedly on the floor. In the general astonishment, Roberto, who is only 16, looks pale and terrified. The séance is interrupted.

After a few days, the family decides to try the experiment again, this time without Roberto, deemed too young and impressionable. Nothing whatsoever happens. The more sceptical members of the family hope that this will dissuade the mother from further attempts, but now the sister is interested too. Roberto himself insists that he is not scared after the initial experience, and the family tries again. The table levitates like the first time, and the family asks the entity responsible for this phenomenon to indicate, through raps, who is the medium. By painstakingly counting the number of raps, participants are awed to see Roberto's name forming.

A few more séances are organized, table levitations continue but soon enough the cumbersome method of communicating through table raps is replaced by automatic writing. Roberto extends his right hand vertically, loosely holding a pencil with his thumb. The pencil seems to stick to the palm of his hand and Roberto writes copiously, with his eyes closed, and with different styles

of handwriting. At the beginning, communications seem to originate from the discarnate personalities of deceased family members or acquaintances of the sitters. Almost immediately, however, a different type of communicator starts to appear: discarnate personalities unrelated to the sitters who, rather than providing comfort and reassurance to individual members, share messages of an ethical and philosophical nature. For some time, both deceased relatives and unknown entities continue to communicate through automatic writing. Then, at the end of 1947, the communication method changes again with the appearance of the trance mediumship, which will become Roberto Setti's trademark for the following 37 years.

THE SÉANCES

It seems impossible to carry out a mapping of all the places where Roberto Setti expressed his mediumship, since the sessions took place in various private homes in Florence and in other cities in Italy such as Brescia, Volterra, Rome, and Palermo, and occasionally in several holiday resorts. In the early years and until 1966 they took place mainly in the Campani residence and in the medium's family home in Florence; some took place at the Institute of Psychosynthesis, for the purpose of investigation by the renowned psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, and then in the homes of those who frequented the circle in those years. Later, during the summer season, the group met in Ceppeto, a town on the hills north of Florence, in the villa of Roberto's sister; during the rest of the year, séances were held in the apartment of Nella Bonora (renowned actress and long-time member of the circle), in the homes of other participants, as well as in Roberto's own home. On more than one occasion, public demonstrations took place in the presence of dozens and even hundreds of people, including in the Alpha Centauri bookstore in Florence and in the theatre of the Institute for the Blind, also in Florence. Furthermore, sessions with the Master *François* were broadcast nine times live on national radio (RAI Radio 1 channel³), and numerous other times on a local FM station. However, with the worsening of Roberto's health, séances were held exclusively in his home (Ruggini, 2015).

The format of the séances remained essentially the same from 1948 until the last ones held in 1984 shortly before the medium's untimely death. In a totally darkened room, Setti appears to fall asleep, and after a while starts speaking with a voice different from his own. Different entities speak, mostly male but sometimes female, each one with his/her own voice and a distinct personality. During the early period, the same mix of deceased relatives and unknown entities come through who initially communicated by automatic writing. Nevertheless, as time went by, relatives and acquaintances of the sitters appear less frequently, and most of the séance is taken up by communication from

3. See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWvTruGPtw> (accessed 26 October 2024).

a small number of entities appearing regularly and identifying themselves as teachers, guides, or facilitators; these were referred to by the members of Cerchio Firenze 77 as ‘the Masters’. Occasionally, ‘drop in’ communicators appear, generally once, to then never appear again.

Communications from the Masters

The group identified a few ‘major’ Masters who were responsible for the educational programme and gave themselves entirely conventional names that did not refer to any historic personality or period. *Dali* was the entity in charge of opening and closing proceedings, introducing the subjects that would be addressed during the séance, and engaging in questions and answers with the participants. *Claudio* dealt primarily with the intricacies of the psychological superstructure the Masters identified as ‘ego’. *Teresa*, a female entity, manifested any time the medium appeared to levitate, and *Fratello Orientale* dealt with the more mystical content of the teachings, adding a decidedly Eastern flavour to the doctrine. *Michel* was the guide responsible for the physical phenomena. *Kempis* was the philosophical guide of the group and the main contributor to the body of the Masters’ doctrine. *Alan* and *Maestro Veneziano* were relatively minor contributors.

Psychologist and psychotherapist Renato Del Favero (1996), a frequent participant of the Florence séances, describes his impressions of the Masters:

These voices, and I say this after so many years, have touched me emotionally and fascinated me intellectually. They were calm but authoritative voices. Lucid voices, rational voices, who did not speak fanatically, who did not try to impose their vision of life. This struck me above all: there was sincere affection and friendship in their words, but no emotional emphasis, no pious rhetoric, no paternalistic exhortation in the name of some religious value, as it is the case with yesterday’s and today’s preachers. They didn’t bother to talk about themselves, who they had been in the past, when and how they had acquired their wisdom. Even the names they used for themselves sounded like a mere convention, just a label to help us identify them. (Del Favero, 1996, p. 2)

Each one of the Masters is immediately recognizable by the distinctive tone, mannerism, and delivery style. The fact that so much of this extraordinary volume of communication has been recorded and that much of it is today available online allows for a level of scrutiny that is not normally possible.⁴ The present authors would like to offer the following observations:

1. In the recorded interviews, when speaking with his own voice Roberto Setti has a thick and immediately recognizable Tuscan accent. Easily identifiable features include the vowel ‘a’, generally pronounced as ‘ha’, and the consonant ‘c’, generally pronounced with a breathy

4. A selection of brief samples from recordings of different Masters can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McL1urKNdDo> (accessed 26 October 2024).

sound like the 'h' in 'hand'. The medium also frequently uses Tuscan dialect expressions.

2. Traces of the 'tell-tale' pronunciation features are found in most of the recordings of the different Masters. For some of them they are relatively easily identifiable, for others they are barely noticeable. It must be noted how difficult it is, in any language, to effectively mask strong regional accents. Moreover, and very importantly, the generally low level at which such inflections appear remains entirely consistent for the same entity, within the same recording and across recordings, over a period of almost four decades. Morphing one's spoken language at this level of detail and keeping up with such finely tuned 'vocal impersonations' for the various entities within the same séance and across séances for such a long time appears in itself quite an extraordinary feat. Furthermore, and interestingly, dialect expressions—used frequently by the medium in the interviews—are never found in the communications from the entities.
3. Three of the Masters allege to be discarnate personalities who once lived outside of Italy. The formerly French entities speak with what may appear as a French-accented Italian, and entity Alan (allegedly an English officer posted in India during Victorian times) with what may appear as an English-accented Italian. Admittedly, faking a foreign accent is very easy. The case of Alan, however, is intriguing. One of the present authors whose mother tongue is Italian and English could detect one crucial detail: Alan consistently drops one of the double consonants which frequently appear in the Italian language (e.g., in tutto, meaning 'everything') and are particularly difficult to negotiate for English speakers. For a native Italian speaker, being able to fake such a minor but idiosyncratic detail requires nothing short of a mother-tongue-level mastery of English, something which Roberto Setti certainly did not possess.
4. The styles with which the different entities speak, the overall tone, and the level of the content of the messages are unique to each of them and is maintained consistently across a large number of recordings. Particularly striking is the entity Kempis, one of the sources of the highest philosophical and spiritual teachings. The listener is confronted with the pitch-perfect delivery one would expect of a professional actor who has either memorized or is reading a piece of complex philosophical material he is very familiar with, or by an exceptional preacher reading an inspiring sermon he himself has written. There is never a mistake, never an uncertainty, never a pause or a correction. The tone flows naturally from meditative lows to rousing, passionate highs.

Philosophical, ethical, and spiritual teachings are delivered in their entirety, as a single 'lesson' or sermon, without interruption. At other points during

the séance, entities do engage in a conversation with the participants, often answering questions. Critically, many witnesses reported receiving answers to questions they only formulated in their thoughts.

Physical phenomena

Extraordinary physical phenomena accompany the trance mediumship. Apports are seen to form in the hands of the medium, initially as a diffuse luminosity surrounded by vapours rising towards the ceiling, which then condense into a semi-solid luminous mass as the medium continues to work on it with his fingers, as one would do with plasticine. The luminous mass gradually solidifies and loses its brightness, eventually turning into a variety of small objects. Several hundred such apports have been reported to have formed during the 37 years of activity of the group. Many have been photographed and can be seen in the books by Cerchio Firenze 77 (1977, 1978, 1981, 1982). Physician Dr Christian Paciscopi provides a striking description of the phenomenon:

The medium's arms were stretched forward, hands touching with the palms upturned. His fingers were working on an ectoplasmic luminescent mass, of the size of a cotton pellet, about three centimetres in diameter. He manipulated the plastic mass as he would have done with plasticine, especially with the thumbs, index, and middle fingers, using the other fingers and the palms of the hands to retain the mass. The tips and about one-third of the fingers appeared surrounded by a halo of light which made both the fingers and the hands, up to the wrists, perfectly visible. The movement of the fingers was rather fast, smooth, and continuous, quite flowing if one can say so. After a minute or two a small, roundish, and darker mass appeared at the centre of the luminosity and gradually grew in size to reach the final size and shape of the apport. [...] The medium was leaning forward and to the right, his body visibly tense; the muscles of his left arm, which I was touching, were spasmodically contracting; he seemed exhausted, as in the midst of a great physical effort. His hand continued to mould the object, which was no longer visible as it was totally encased by the hands, as if the fingers were trying to protect it; the luminosity of the fingers increased, luminous ectoplasm oozed from the hands; thin vapours rolled upwards and we could smell ozone. After another two minutes, the medium stood up and gave the object to Dr Serenella Rossignoli, and then returned to his seat whilst luminous spots persisted on his hands, his shirt, and in the air all around him. Such luminous spots—not unlike glowworms—remained visible for the remainder of the séance. Amongst other things, they also moved to the hands of another participant, who was holding the medium's hands; some of these spots were still visible after the medium woke up from the trance—one on his left cheek, two on the neck, and a few on the breast. I repeatedly touched these bright spots without altering either their brightness—rather intense—nor their shape. After a few minutes they disappeared completely, as if the light had been turned off. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p. 42–43)

The apport is a round brooch, about four centimetres in diameter, with a mother of pearl base and a black Harlequin mask in the centre.

Different, intense scents or perfumes appear as different entities come forward, with the particularity that, as a new scent appears, the one connected with the previous entity suddenly and completely disappears. Dr Luigi Lapi, a neuropsychiatrist, writes:

The manifestation of various entities was accompanied by the appearance of scents or perfumes, and it must be noted—this is very important—that one quickly disappeared when the next one appeared. All the scents were of the kind I would describe as ‘sweet’, difficult for me to define as I am not an expert, but all characterized by strong intensity. Now, given that scents are caused by volatile substances that interact with olfactory cells in the nose, they should have saturated the environment and therefore the various scents should have mixed, rather than replace one another. The second important fact—somehow in contrast to the previous observation—was that the last perfume, very sweet and strong, persisted for a long time. It impregnated my clothes and stuck to my left hand in particular, so that I could still distinctly smell it the next day. It was also smelt by the participants of a group therapy session in my study. A shared hallucination can therefore be ruled out. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p. 54)

Other physical phenomena were also reported. For example, Prof. Ugo Dèttore, a philosopher and revered translator, writes:

Towards the end of the séance, the room where we were sitting seemed to be suddenly showered by something that, in the darkness and based upon the noise and our tactile impressions, seemed to us to be great quantities of grains of rice or wheat. When the light came on, we understood that it was fresh olive tree leaves. What immediately appeared bizarre was the speed with which such leaves were thrown at us and onto the floor—it certainly didn’t feel like they were simply falling. After the séance I tried myself to throw some of these leaves onto the floor, without being able to produce any noise. It would have been very difficult to produce the whooshing sound we thought caused by rice falling even using dried leaves, let alone the sensation of impact on our faces and bodies. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p. 57)

Similar ‘showers’, including of rose petals rosebuds and accompanied by the same whooshing sounds, were reported by other witnesses on several other occasions.

The medium himself appears to levitate, a metre, a metre and a half above the chair where he sits, to then crash down on the floor. The already quoted Dr Lapi writes:

I was firmly holding the medium’s wrist with my left hand, about two centimetres from the wrist joint: our forearms formed an angle of about 20 degrees; at some point I felt his forearm lifting and, me remaining in a sitting position, the angle widened to some 90 degrees. I follow the levitation up to the point where I had to let go of his wrist, even if I was standing on my toe tips: the levitation happened vertically, with no side movements. After I let go of him, I had the impression that the medium was moving around the room, close to the ceiling, without touching the microphone hanging from the chair or the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Finally there was a falling noise, as if the medium had collapsed back onto the chair. The fall

seemed to have no consequences—he didn't even wake up from the trance. At the end of the séance, the medium was perfectly OK and only showed traces of underarm perspiration on his shirt. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p.55–56)

At the end of the séance the medium wakes up from trance and has no recollection whatsoever of what happened in terms of physical phenomena or anything of what was said by the entities.

CERCHIO FIRENZE 77

The name Cerchio Firenze 77 was chosen in the mid-1970s by the core group of people who had been regularly attending Roberto Setti's séances since 1946. The group included family members to begin with and was then slowly enlarged to include friends and close acquaintances. All in all, it comprised some 50 people, mostly of upper-middle professional class extraction. This number does not include the many visitors who, over the course of 37 years, were invited to attend the séances occasionally or for short periods. It is estimated that between 200 and 300 people in total must have attended at least one of the private séances (Ruggini, 2015).

The reason for giving the group a name was the decision—including following a suggestion by the Masters themselves—to publish in print the material that had been recorded on magnetic tape and painstakingly transcribed (mostly by renowned Italian actress Nella Bonora) beginning in 1956. Since, as noted above, the medium strictly refused to be identified as the channel through which the information had been conveyed, it was decided that the books would appear under the collective name of the group. The origin of the name is very simple: *cerchio* in Italian means circle, Firenze is the town where the séances were being held, and 77 is a play on words on the medium's family name. Setti can be seen as the plural of *sette*, which in Italian means 'seven': Setti equals 'two sevens' and that is written as 77 (Del Favero, 1996).

During the period 1977–1983, four books were published by Cerchio Firenze 77, each approximately 300 pages long. The format is the same for all of them: about a quarter of each book is devoted to a preface/introduction and to signed witness accounts of participants who had attended the séances, mostly describing materialization of apports and other physical phenomena. The rest consists of verbatim transcriptions of the information channelled by the medium, organized by subject and attributed to the various individual Masters. During the period 1984–1996 seven more volumes appeared in the series Scuola del Cerchio Firenze 77, these containing only philosophical and spiritual teachings. On the whole, these publications enjoyed a remarkable and enduring success on the Italian market. A credible estimate puts overall sales at over half a million copies to this day.

Remarkably, and possibly because of the very reserved character of the medium and the private nature of the séances, despite the considerable and enduring popularity of the publications, the experience of Cerchio Firenze 77

never gave rise to any larger organization of followers of the teachings, let alone any cult or sect. At the time of writing, there is a weakly active Facebook group called *Amici del Cerchio Firenze 77*⁵ and what appears to be a rather decrepit webpage⁶ presenting a variety of information already published in the books.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

The true heritage of the experience called Cerchio Firenze 77 consists of a unified set of carefully described concepts, solidly constructed by the Masters over almost four decades in a coherent and consequent [sequential?] manner. The unitary nature of these concepts is such that they can be considered a single edifice of philosophical, spiritual, moral, and cosmogonic thought—a doctrine or a teaching in the broadest sense. This section of the paper will attempt to briefly outline some of the key components of such a doctrine, as variously but coherently expressed in the over one thousand transcribed communications available in the first four books published by Cerchio Firenze 77 (1977, 1978, 1981, 1982). The sheer quantity and breadth of information available in such transcriptions, and the fact that each key concept is addressed dozens of times by different Masters at different levels of depth and with different styles and metaphors, makes precise referencing practically impossible. In attempting to summarize the key philosophical and spiritual teachings, the present authors also drew from a comparative theological and philosophical analysis of the doctrine of the Masters by Francesco Baroni (2011). In the following text, key terms consistently used by the Masters are italicized.

By way of introduction, it is useful to look at what Prof. Giulio Cogni, a university philosophy lecturer and a scholar of Eastern spirituality (also known for a renowned Italian translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*), wrote about the experience of Cerchio Firenze 77:

The thought that emerges from the transcriptions of the recordings is deeply creative, and so high that one would be tempted—if the circumstances were not known—to think that the medium simply memorized, word by word, the pages written by some great master. It is the vision of an absolute monistic pantheism, derived directly by the texts of the Yoga tradition, from the *Upanishads*, from the *Bhagavad Gita*, from the *Bramasutra*, built on the foundations of the oldest *Vedas*, with Buddhist injections. These lessons, delivered with extraordinary fluency and without—ever—the slightest uncertainty or mistake, are often extraordinarily beautiful and of a depth that still has to be fully realized. They convey a vision of the world which is quintessentially Eastern, essentially identical to the Vedanta philosophy, reaching the highest conclusions as they are found in Shankara's non-dual Advaita Vedanta. In this sense, it is like every time a great thinker came through from an Indian or Buddhist environment and taught lessons, without using the Sanskrit terminology but rather by translating the concepts into a Western or Christian language. (Personal communication reported by Ferraro (1996, p. 170–171)

5. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/101850800148> (accessed 26 October 2024).

6. <http://cerchiofirenze77.org> (accessed 26 October 2024).

It is not only a matter of language, however. Despite gaining a certain popularity, beginning in the 19th century, Eastern philosophical and spiritual thought has remained difficult to fully comprehend and integrate by the Western mind, rooted as it is in logic, positivism and, above all, reason. The main strength and originality of the teachings of the Masters has been to leverage on these tools of Western modernity in order to make mystical insights approachable, understandable, in a sense *inescapable* for the rational mind. In doing so, the Masters proceeded methodically, very gradually moving from simpler concepts to the highest complexity conveyed during the final years of Cerchio Firenze 77. Sometimes they remained for long periods on what they called *intermediate truths* or *waypoints*, to give members of the group time to assimilate and adapt to ideas which appeared very far from everyday experience before introducing even deeper and more radical concepts.

A case in point is the teachings regarding space and time, gradually introduced as not having intrinsic existence but rather as no more than an extension of subjective experience—the byproduct of biological beings living following a certain paradigm which they mistake for reality. According to the Masters, everything happens simultaneously. Even the various phases of the evolution of human beings described hereafter co-exist in the eternity of no-time, like the individual frames of a movie: it is human consciousness that creates the impression of a sequence by focusing on one at a time. There exists no evolving individual; rather, there are countless levels and forms of awareness, all existing simultaneously at different points in space and time and perceived as an individualized human self. As limitations drop, awareness becomes progressively higher, larger, more encompassing, in an expansion which culminates in God, who contains and at the same transcends of all levels and forms of awareness, beyond the appearance of separation. This conception of a hierarchy of co-existing levels of awareness is strikingly similar to the mathematically grounded theory of conscious agents recently proposed by cognitive psychologist Donald Hoffman (Hoffman & Prakash, 2014).

Humans are therefore encouraged by the Masters not to identify themselves with their physical bodies, for these are said to be nothing but vehicles—a medium towards the truest and most important part of being, which resides in other *planes of existence* and controls the physical body through the brain. Planes of existence must not be understood as different locations in space, but rather different states of aggregation of the substance that underpins all reality. They are ontological layers, each one characterized by a specific level of *density*, from the crudest to the subtlest. In this sense, the cosmology described by the Masters mirrors what is believed by most spiritist and theosophical individuals. The Masters analyse man and the universe in parallel, for one is the mirror of the other. Both emerge from the superimposition of *planes*, which the Masters describe, in descending order of *density*, as *physical*, *astral*, *mental*, and *akashic*. To each of these levels of the cosmos corresponds a *body*. The

physical body is the vehicle through which humans live in the *physical plane* and which they mistakenly conceive of as their true self. The *astral body* is the seat of vital energy and of feelings, emotions, and desire, the *mental body* is the seat of the faculties normally associated with the mind. Lastly, the *akashic body* is said to be a receptacle of the significant impressions generated by all the experiences lived by the individual through different incarnations. Beyond that level, the Masters speak of *spiritual planes*, the abode of man's true self and corresponding to the ultimate nature of reality. The *Absolute* sits at the top of the Masters' ontology. However, the *Absolute* is not the apex of reality—it is *Reality*. The *Absolute* is the only reality that exists objectively. All other realities are relative; they are subjective delimitations of the *One Reality*, the *Absolute*, the *Being* which is said to be infinite, eternal, and immutable.

The existence of different *bodies* existing on different *planes* is linked to the concept of survival of bodily death, central to the doctrine of the Masters, and provides a key to understanding the progression of experiences man goes through once the physical body has ceased functioning. It is interesting to note that the features of the afterlife described by the Masters parallel the testimony coherently and consistently provided during the last century and a half by deathbed visions, near-death experiences and after-death communication (Calvi Parisetti, 2021). According to the Masters, after the death of the physical body, the person 'wakes up' in the *astral plane*, the main feature of which is to be *psychoplastic*, meaning a perceived reality which is shaped by desires and emotions. Persons with strong earthly desires and attachments create a version of life on earth corresponding to their thoughts and desires but fail to get the enjoyment they were after as they lack a physical body. Desires and attachments gradually wane, and the person moves to the next plane of existence. Persons without strong attachment or desires do not dwell in the *astral plane* and quickly move to the *mental plane*. Here the person, having shed the *astral body*, seat of emotions and desires, exists in a realm of pure thought which is equally *psychoplastic* but directed to the satisfaction of the quest for knowledge and understanding. In time, even the *mental body* is shed and life in the crudest planes of existence comes to an end. The person is then left with the *akashic body*, which, unlike the others, is said to be permanent and to continue to grow as experiences accumulate throughout lifetimes. What grows progressively, what increases through the experiences lived through cycles of existence in the lower planes is not consciousness per se, but rather *conscience*, a broad concept closer to the idea of wisdom than to knowledge.

Reincarnation is therefore another pillar of the doctrine of the Masters. The individual is subject to multiple incarnations in bodies capable of expressing the level of evolution, or *conscience*, he or she has acquired. At the beginning of a new cycle, the *akashic body* is enrobed by new *mental matter* (which provides the basis for the mind of the upcoming incarnation), by new *astral matter* (which will give the prospective incarnate a new range of emotional interests

and drives), and finally links to a new physical body. The new individual will therefore have a new personality and will evolve in the environment and conditions which are best suited to advancing on his/her specific path of growth. This repeating process is not merely cyclical. Rather, it is an upward spiralling movement towards ever more experiences, knowledge, understanding, with the ongoing aim to expand *conscience*.

Strictly linked to the concepts (*laws*, in the Masters' parlance) of reincarnation and evolution is the *law of cause and effect*. This appears as a sophisticated interpretation of the idea of Karma, whereby human thoughts, desires, intentions, and deeds are useful if they contribute to progress towards greater *conscience*, and useless when they go against it. Causes and effects link human beings in a colossal network of intricate relationships: what appears as a 'bad deed' by individual A on individual B represents for individual B the effect of a cause he or she had previously set in motion, and becomes an opportunity for him/her to learn a particular lesson. Likewise, a similar action by another individual, C, on individual A represents the effect of the cause individual A had originally set in motion with a 'bad deed' on individual B. In this sense, actions are not arbitrary, even if they appear to be: individuals remain wholly responsible for their actions, but everything happens according to a perfectly balanced and finely tuned design which unfolds for countless beings across many incarnations. Direct experience, and pain in particular, are certainly not the only ways to learn lessons: man can come to realize *truths* through intuition and reason, and pain comes as a last resort, not the punishment for a sin but rather a further learning opportunity.

As outlined above, the *laws* of evolution, reincarnation, and cause and effect all operate in the eternal present of the *Absolute*. Consequently, all the progressively evolving 'versions' of an individual—both as embodied human being and as discarnate personality—co-exist simultaneously in non-time. A 'spirit guide' is therefore not a separate, supposedly more evolved being, but rather a sort of 'future self' from which the individual can source wisdom and guidance in his/her subjective present.

Possibly the most striking feature of the teaching by the Masters—striking in that it represents an absolute novelty and a significant departure from Eastern philosophical thought—is a probabilistic conception of reality which resonates with certain constructs of modern physics. Within the *Absolute's* eternal present co-exist not only the lives lived by different individualities but also all possible 'variations' of such lives, the countless unchosen possibilities essential to allow creatures a degree of choice.

We must imagine a Cosmos which exists somehow like a movie reel, in which every instant of such Cosmos can be likened to a single frame of the movie. But for each instant there are innumerable parallel variations, all of which can be ran across only once and only in one direction. This is the key to the Cosmos. (Cerchio Firenze 77, 1978, p. 168)

The Masters stress that such ‘variations’ are ontologically equivalent, that is they are equally ‘real’. Man exists simultaneously not only as a ‘multiple selves’ corresponding to the different levels of *conscience* characterizing an individual’s evolution, but also in all the possible ‘variations’, the paths which were not chosen but are as real as the ones actually chosen. Every personality therefore exists at the centre of a vast network of possibilities, surrounded by ‘probable personalities’ which have equal ontological dignity (Baroni, 2011).

Finally, the Masters’ conception of God as the *Absolute* adheres to a strict idealist monism. All that exists is an *Absolute Consciousness* which must not be mistaken for its expression (i.e. the phenomenological world of consciousness). Rather, it is much better understood as naked, fundamental awareness—that ground *experiencing* (the Italian *sentire*, which means feeling, experiencing, being aware of) which has in itself the infinite power to give raise to experiences (the content of consciousness) without in any way modifying its own nature. The Cosmos of infinite, simultaneous, ontologically equivalent possibilities is the *virtual emanation of Self in Self*.

CONTROVERSY

It is remarkable that a phenomenon that lasted nearly four decades and gained a considerable nationwide renown attracted what appears as a single episode of organized public criticism and attempted debunking. This came in the form of a short segment in a popular prime time national television science programme aired in 1994.⁷ In that particular segment, the host, Piero Angela (an Italian icon of science journalism and a leading figure of the sceptical movement), exchanges with Luigi Garlaschelli, a chemist and an equally prominent figurehead of CICAP (Italian Control Committee on Paranormal Claims), making three egregious claims. First, Garlaschelli claims to have been able to produce visual effects essentially identical to some of the physical manifestations reported during the séances of Roberto Setti (diffused luminosity surrounded by rising vapours) using white phosphorous. He also claims that witnesses who had participated in the séances and later observed his experiments with white phosphorous confirmed that the phenomena were essentially identical. Second, he suggests that the degenerative disease the medium suffered and eventually died from was a consequence of ‘chronic phosphorous poisoning’, resulting from the medium being in contact with the substance for a long time. Third, Angela and Garlaschelli refer to a photograph that appears to show an apport (a small oil lamp) lying on the floor under the chair where the medium was sitting *before* the same object appeared as an apport.

Concerning the first claim, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) describes white phosphorous as a substance that ignites instantly upon contact

7. A recording of the segment is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_5w5pBIr1Q&t=261s (accessed 26 October 2024).

with oxygen and is often used by militaries to illuminate battlefields, to generate smokescreens, and as an incendiary. Once ignited, white phosphorous is very difficult to extinguish and sticks to surfaces like skin and clothing (a feature that has indeed been consistently reported during the Setti séances). However, the WHO (2024) warns that the substance is “harmful to humans by all routes of exposure”. The smoke from burning phosphorous is harmful to the eyes and respiratory tract due to the presence of phosphoric acids and phosphine. No such ill effects were ever reported by any of the participants in the Cerchio Firenze 77 séances. Furthermore, and critically, the WHO (2024) warns that “white phosphorous can cause deep and severe burns, penetrating even through bone”, to the point that “caution must be exercised to avoid secondary exposure of medical personnel from victims suffering from white phosphorous burns” as “white phosphorous can re-ignite during or after initial treatment due to contact with oxygen”. Essentially, the sceptics claim that certain visual effects consistently reported during the séances of Roberto Setti were produced hundreds of times through a procedure that would have resulted in a major medical emergency involving the medium himself and the séance participants.

Concerning the second claim, the presence of such devastating consequences from acute phosphorous exposure and intoxication (on top of the severe burns and eyes and lungs irritation, the US Centres for Disease Control (2024) list dysrhythmias, coma, hypotension, and death) makes the ‘chronic poisoning’ hypothesis untenable. Furthermore, the progressive symptoms of the neurological degenerative disease Setti suffered from has nothing in common with any of the symptoms described above.

The third claim has been extensively analysed by Ferraro (1996, pp. 107–109). In summary, the oil lamp photographed under the medium’s chair: (a) doesn’t have a base, whilst the full apport does; (b) doesn’t have several accessories which the apport had; and (c) is considerably shorter than the apport—in particular, the stem, which in the apport connects the base to the lamp itself, is several centimetres shorter. Ferraro’s conclusions are that apport and the object in the photograph are the same object, but the latter has been photographed *in the course of materialization*, and therefore appears incomplete.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The mediumship of Roberto Setti and the experience of Cerchio Firenze 77 represent a rather unique case in the history of spiritualism. On the one hand, carefully documented, remarkable mental and physical mediumship phenomena spanning four decades were never seriously challenged despite enduring, nationwide renown. On the other, the availability of verbatim transcriptions (and, in many cases, the original audio recordings) related to vast amounts of allegedly channelled information allow for a level of study and scrutiny that is rarely possible. Furthermore, the fact that the strict anonymity of the person at the centre of these phenomena was protected for such a long time also has

few—if any—parallels. Finally, the continued effort by a group of committed individuals (themselves operating under strict anonymity and using a collective name) to disseminate the teachings allegedly received through channelling has also, as far as the present authors can tell, no precedent.

Among the many questions that remain unanswered, perhaps the most important one is the origin of the extraordinary quantities of channelled information. As the hypothesis of deliberate fraud and deception appears very difficult to entertain, one is left to wonder about the possible identity and ontological nature of the Masters. As finely observed by Francesco Baroni (2011), at various points the Masters themselves deny their own existence as individuals:

Not ‘spirits’, therefore, but ‘polarizations of consciousness’ picked up by the medium, and which in the final analysis are part of his inner life, or rather of the multiform life of the one *Consciousness*. The Masters of the Circle do not renounce therefore—even at the cost of questioning their own identity—to take to the most extreme consequences the idea, fundamental in their doctrines, of the profound unity of *Reality*. (Baroni, 2011, p. 185)

Corresponding author

PIERO CALVI-PARISETTI

Email: pcalvip@gmail.com

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