

## CORRESPONDENCE

### *The Enigma of Daniel Home*

To the Editor,

M. H. Coleman has raised numerous objections to my review of Trevor Hall's *The Enigma of Daniel Home* ('Correspondence', June, 1985). Although I find them unpersuasive, they might nevertheless mislead unwary readers; hence, they deserve a reply. Responding to each point, however, would lead to an intolerably long communication. So I will address only those that seem most crucial.

Coleman suggests I should not have evaluated Hall's book 'as if it were an exhaustive review of Home's life and works', since the book is merely 'a collection of essays, each directed at solving a problem associated with Home' (p. 123). Now of course Hall does not purport to offer an *exhaustive* study of Home. But that's hardly the issue. Hall (and Prometheus) make it clear that their larger objective is to evaluate Home's mediumship generally. That is why the book's subtitle reads 'Medium or Fraud? The mystery of Britain's most famous spiritualist unraveled'. Moreover, it is clear throughout the book, especially in Hall's repeated assertion that Home's phenomena can be explained away by appeals to conjuring and suggestion, that the particular problems Hall considers bear on the question of whether Home *ever* produced genuine phenomena. That is why I criticize Hall for ignoring the very best pieces of evidence, and for devoting nearly one-fourth of his book to the alleged Ashley House levitation, one of the evidentially weakest reports in all of the literature on Home. It is quite ridiculous to suppose that one can make a sound skeptical case against Home, and never examine (even cursorily) the wealth of good material supporting the genuineness of his phenomena.

Coleman also insists that I should not dismiss the issue of Home's vanity as a red herring. His position is a variant on the obviously defective policy adopted

long ago by the SPR, when it refused to treat as evidential any phenomenon apparently produced by a medium (*e.g.*, Eusapia Palladino) once caught cheating. But in ruling on the genuineness of a medium's phenomena, the issue is not whether the medium once cheated (or whether the medium has a suspect character generally). Rather, it is whether there are instances in which the indications are strong that cheating did not occur, or in which concerns over the medium's character are simply irrelevant. One reason the cases of Home and Palladino are strong is that there are many such instances. Naturally, if Home's case rested on nothing more substantial than the weakest pieces of evidence, then Coleman would be entitled to claim that many of Home's 'wonders depended on his integrity . . .' (p. 124). But most of Home's phenomena were observed under conditions far superior to those cited by Hall. It's just that Hall never discusses them, and Coleman, too, appears to ignore them. Consequently, both men seem to betray an astonishing lack of appreciation of what makes Home's case so interesting, and so important, in the minds of many researchers.

Coleman displays this again when he defends Hall's condemnation of Home in virtue of the medium's association with Frank Herne. For one thing, it is far from clear that Herne always cheated. Palladino cheated on occasion; but the temptation to cheat (*e.g.*, when the phenomena are not forthcoming) is easy to understand, and besides, some of Eusapia's phenomena are coercive. Furthermore, I don't see any problem in supposing that genuine phenomena (Home's), or Home's singing (see Medhurst, *et al.*, 1972, p. 158), might have provided a distraction allowing for spurious phenomena (Herne's). But these can only be side issues. Once more Coleman misses the point. What matters is that the seance in question has almost no evidential value, since the phenomena occurred in the dark. Unfortunately, it is characteristic of Hall (and apparently Coleman) to rely on such evidence. Here, as elsewhere, a pivotal argument against Home rests on just another poorly-documented seance (supplemented in this case by a glaringly fallacious appeal to guilt by association). I'm disappointed that Coleman seems unable to spot such conspicuous flaws in Hall's dialectic.

And it is preposterous to think I endorse the principle that 'phenomena not actually demonstrated to be fraudulent should be regarded as genuine, even when produced by a medium shown to be fraudulent on some other occasion' (p. 125). That principle is never stated by me, nor presupposed in any of my arguments. I maintain only that in deciding on the genuineness of a medium's phenomena, the cases that matter are the best ones, not those in which poor conditions of control obtained, or which are poorly documented.

It is unfortunate, too, that Coleman should cite Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism* (1902) as a responsible example of negative critical reaction to Crooke's spring-balance and accordion experiments. Podmore's discussion of the evidence for physical phenomena are among the most blatantly biased, distorted, and poorly-reasoned in the parapsychological literature. For example, Podmore's discussion of the spring-balance and accordion tests in the pages cited is extremely cursory and misleading. In fact, Podmore doesn't even *describe* the accordion tests. He refers to them only in passing as 'preliminary experiments with an accordion' (vol. 2, p. 238). And he fails to note the important fact that in the seance of June 21, 1871, light was increased after the first trial (Crookes,

1889, p. 110), thereby making it appear that illumination was poor throughout and that Home's use of a thread attached to the knees of his trousers would have remained undetected. Furthermore, Podmore claims that Home ordered the light diminished for the first trial. But that seems to have been Podmore's invention; Crookes never mentions it. Coleman also fails to mention that for many of Home's phenomena, Podmore could do no better than fall back on the exceptionally weak hypothesis of collective hypnosis. (For a more detailed discussion of Podmore's offenses, and of the weaknesses generally in skeptical dismissals of the evidence for physical phenomena, see Braude, in press.)

Regarding the Morio accusation, how much *substance* there is in the alleged Barthez exposure is shown by Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo's *conclusion*—not by the amount of space devoted to it in his discussion. At best, the length of the discussion reflects how much interest the allegation generated at the time, or how important it would be *if* it were indeed substantiated. But Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo reluctantly concluded that the evidence was defective.

Coleman also takes me to task for not mentioning Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo's second and later discussion of the Morio accusation (1930). I did, in fact, restrict my comments to his earlier article (1912); but that was simply because it was the article cited by Hall. In any case, now that Coleman has raised the issue, I shall add that Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo's later paper is remarkably and rather uncharacteristically bad. His resistance to physical phenomena was always apparent in his work; but his appraisals of the evidence tended nevertheless to be careful and sober. However, in his second treatment of the Morio accusation, Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo falters. For one thing, he never retracts his judgment that the evidence seems no better than second-hand, and that the 'chief witness on the negative side was undoubtedly strongly prejudiced against Home, as he himself admits . . .' (1912, p. 228). He simply neglects to mention the points, apparently since they would weaken the general negative tone of his discussion of Home. He also admits (pp. 250–51) that the additional second- or third-hand accounts are no weightier than a conflicting account he cites that no fraud was discovered on the occasion in question. The Count simply, and perhaps revealingly, refuses to linger on the point.

Moreover, Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo clearly goes too far in his assessment of some of his 'evidence'. For example, he quotes Baron du Potet's vague feelings of doubts as to the genuineness of Home's phenomena—the sorts of doubts to which, understandably, every medium has been subject—and then two paragraphs later refers to it as 'testimony tending to disprove the legend as to Home's immunity from *detection*' (p. 259, emphasis added). There is much else wrong with this article; but I prefer not to get involved in a lengthy critical examination of the Count's work.

A few quick remarks about other errors in Coleman's letter. For one thing, even though Dingwall eventually identified the 'mystery of iniquity' with the overcoat incident rather than with Home's possible homosexuality, Hall does not mention it. He clearly (p. 37) concerns himself with Dingwall's earlier position. And what Coleman considers 'documentation' good enough to raise the overcoat story above the level of gossip is not a first-hand account of the matter. The story told in the relevant passage from Elizabeth Browning's letter is *at least*

second-hand, and reads like juicy gossip to me. But once again, this is all much ado about a poorly-documented incident, and one which is irrelevant to the question of whether Home's phenomena were genuine.

Moreover, it was Hall, not I, who used the phrase 'bogus seances' to describe Besterman's study (p. 43.). Perhaps Coleman objects to my remark that Besterman 'fooled' his sitters, since (after all) they had been told the phenomena would be produced by normal means. I realize that one may wish to dispute that use of the term. But it certainly does not display a confidence-wrenching lack of comprehension of the evidence.

Finally, concerning my criticism that Hall conveniently ignores the personality of Jane Lyon and the details of her relationship with Home, Coleman wonders what purpose would be served by exploring that relationship during the period before Mrs. Lyon filed her suit against Home. That is a surprising remark, especially for one so inclined to focus on questions concerning Home's character. The obvious answer, in any case, is that it might give us some idea of what was going on behind the scenes, and whether it sheds light on the testimony. Both Hall and Coleman should have mentioned the detective work done by Elizabeth Jenkins on this matter (Jenkins, 1982).

There are many good books on spiritualism. Hall's is certainly not one of them. I would hope that Mr. Coleman and I can now turn our attention to worthier efforts.

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To the Editor:

Michael Coleman may recall that when *New Light on Old Ghosts* appeared in 1965 informed opinion evoked the query, 'What new light?' Dr. Hall's latest offering close to 20 years on once more promises to shed 'new light'. In mitigation of its shortcomings Dr. Coleman points out that *The Enigma of Daniel Home* merely claims to be a collection of essays, though much of it has already been printed elsewhere. The same writer has also recently seen fit to reprint another old work under a new title. But Hall has been more ambitious in scope than previously in claiming to have unravelled 'the mysteries of Britain's most famous spiritualist'.