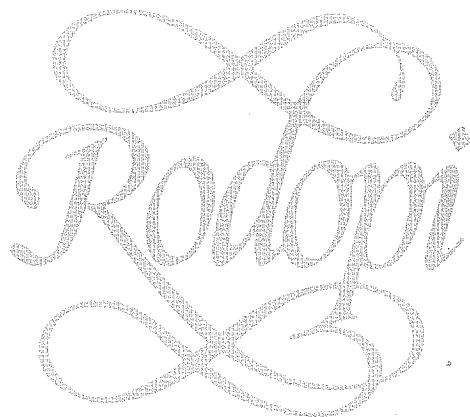


Offprint • Sonderdruck • Tiré à part • Separata



Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA
2001

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Vergote, Antoon, « Changing Figures and the Importance of Demonic Possession », dans Belzen, (Jacob A.) (éd.), *Psychohistory in Psychology of Religion : Interdisciplinary Studies*, (coll. « International Series in the Psychology of Religion », 12), Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 2001, pp. 21-40.

CHANGING FIGURES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMONIC POSSESSION

Antoon Vergote

Psychohistory

Recognition of the Psychological Factor

Historiography is as old as the scientific mind itself. Psychology, however, is a most recent human science, a very late child of modernity. To be sure, an awareness of psychological elements in human behavior and an interest in observing and commenting on them has always been present in human consciousness. Traces of it can be found in old historiography as well as in almost all literature. Moral wisdom and mystical writings, in particular, have made penetrating psychological analyses. However, the late 19th-century effort to reserve the term “psychology” for the systematic study of a specific dimension in human personality seems to me to be justified for two reasons. First, before that time psychological analyses, even those conducted somewhat systematically, were made with a *practical purpose* in mind, as for instance in texts on moral wisdom and in spiritual literature. It is significant in this respect that Aristotle’s treatises on ethical and political philosophy contain many interesting psychological observations. His treatise known as *Peri psychès (De Anima: on the psyche)*, the first treatise on “psychology”, studies the *psychè* (the soul) as the principle of living beings; accordingly this psychology is a part of biology. Second, in the late 19th century, psychology appeared as a separate discipline because the creators of the new science shared the general conviction that the behavior of a human individual must be explained as a response to interior and exterior stimuli. The term “psychology” indeed contains two components working in tandem: the postulation of a unit (the *psychè*) that functions according to lawful regularities (*logy*, derived from *logos*).

Following J.A. Belzen (1997), I would conceive of psychohistory as the part of historiography that uses psychological concepts and theories for explaining important aspects of past human phenomena and which, in doing so, contributes to the understanding of the facts described.

Historiography that does not submit to harsh philosophical positivism and does not limit itself to the mere "mental" observation of facts always ventures interpretations. Since human facts comprise interconnections of multiple elements, historiography is highly inclusive and actually encompasses numerous special disciplines or approaches. Depending on the focus of interest and also on the implicit or explicit philosophy at work, historians attach causal importance to the actions of some major personalities and, more generally, to the influence that subjective dispositions of some groups may have on facts and situations. At any rate, historians all recognize the historical significance of some persons. A psychohistorical study can concentrate on a person viewed in his context. It can also examine the influence exerted by a single person on a collective group. Whatever it may be — focusing on the individual for himself or on some individual as a major influential factor in his or her group — historiography asks some psychological questions about a person or about a group: Why did they act or react in this particular way? What were their intentions? How did they view the other, or the environment, and how did this view influence the historical facts? What did they believe? Why did their belief change, and how?

It is of course a difficult task for the historian to make his choice between theoretically conflicting concepts in the field of psychology. The historian should be attentive to every decision he makes. For the psychological concepts he adopts not only shape his explanations of human actions, explicitly or implicitly, but they also regulate the focus of his attention and the search for the organizing principles of psychologically significant data. The use of psychology by historians is a more delicate affair because they risk neglecting the fact that the theoretical concepts of psychology are often influenced by preconceptions deriving from some specific cultural milieu. I could demonstrate, for example, that Freud's applied psychoanalysis of Moses, of Da Vinci, and of certain myths suffers from a positivistic and a pathological bias (Vergote, 1997).

The presence of opposing theories within the diverse psychologies should not pose an obstacle to psychohistory, for historiography cannot neglect psychology. Human individuals are the acting causal factors in the events studied by historiographers. Indeed, because it is the science of the processes and motives organizing the finalized actions of individuals and groups, psychology is a part of any complex historical explanation. The measure of psychological involvement in any historical understanding is of course variable. It is incontestably greater when a person's action had a great impact on the course of history in the society studied. Even then, the contribution of psychology is variable.

Suppose that for the historian the killing of Caesar was a major factor in the course of the Roman Empire. A full understanding of this action requires an accurate knowledge of the motives Brutus had for killing him. But here, as always, the meaning of the consciously expressed motivations was partly determined by reasons extending beyond the self-conscious mind. Psychohistory can examine the possibility of shedding some light on psychological factors that are not directly observable. Even if the studied historical event was a very personal one and if the subject has already commented on it extensively, it remains part of the task of psychohistory to search beyond the explicit conscious reasons the person thought he had. Psychological inquiry does not work with suspicion or deception, but with the principle that one's conscious mind is in interaction with the contents of one's emotional memory and with processes extending beyond clear reason. This theoretical conviction is precisely what constitutes the recognition of psychic reality.

Psychohistory is undoubtedly important for historical studies of such events as the religious conversion of St. Paul or St. Augustine, for these events had an immense impact on the religious and general cultural history of the West. The historian who too easily adopts the rational view that the explicit texts written by the subjects speak for themselves, risks falling into the trap of reading himself in the text. Proust may have exaggerated when he wrote (I no longer know where) that he who reads is the reader of his own self. An exercise in hermeneutics can warn the reader of autobiographical explanations not to think he can simply enter into the mind and experience of the author, and from there directly perceive the meaning of the motivations the author has put forward. The wide variety of exegetical commentaries on St. Paul's conversion text (Rom. 7-8) is exemplary in this respect. Some authors consider a minimal interpretation to be the most faithful to the words as they lay there, apparently open to everyone. This hermeneutic decision in fact has served to cool down the manifest emotional tension of the text and has reduced its dialectical movement to a matter of mere rhetorical technique. Theologically trained interpreters, however, are able to perceive the barely perceptible connections with the broader monotheistic context and the many tensions within it. Replaced in its vast background, however, it becomes apparent that the text has been submitted (in most cases, I fear) to a reading on which the interpreter has imposed too many of his or her own theological preoccupations and conceptions about sin and redemption. I suggest analyzing the text by using the psychological schemes that are revealed through practical and clinical psychological studies of the structuring function of the law, studies of guilt experiences, and of the achievement of trust. This would

produce a more objective interpretation of St. Paul's text, one that is more faithful to the connection between St. Paul's spiritual experience and his developing theological insights (Vergote, 1971).

Specific Risks

There are undoubtedly specific problems connected with psychohistory. To begin with, the psychological interpretation is done in the absence of the person being studied. The psychologist must base his findings on signs which the person did not reveal with the explicit intention of providing material for a psychological interpretation. The psychologist cannot use instruments like scales and tests. The instruments that are available to him have been adapted for a different type of population. And the absent person cannot respond to the specific items. The psychologist can only keep the items in mind and, looking at the person's own self-expressions, try to answer as he thinks the person would himself. In interpreting these hypothetical answers, it is then necessary to take into account the differences between populations. In a similar way, the psychologist can apply the psychological schemes learned from his clinical experience talking with people in a technical therapeutic setting and following the psychoanalytic device of free association. The application of psychological schemes of interpretation to persons *in absentia* is a kind of mental experimentation. Nothing in this is contrary to scientific principles, for all psychological interpretation and explanation works to some degree with mental experimentation and is never a simple inductive summary of accumulated data. Likewise, every scholar works in this manner when interpreting literary texts with complex personalities and plots, such as Shakespeare's tragic-ironic play *Hamlet*.

The idea itself of causal psychological explanation brings with it insidious dangers for psychohistory and is the origin of non-scientific fantasies in this field. Especially in explaining the lives of historical individuals, the use of psychoanalytic concepts may lead to the application of explanatory schemes hastily borrowed from observed or imagined clinical observations. Let us take the example of the clinical fact that infantile incest experience may result in hysterical neurosis, and in a particular context hysterical neurosis can bring about the conviction and symptoms of demonic possession. This clinical knowledge may lead the psychohistorian to interpret apparently similar symptoms and fantasies of a "possessed" woman as being the effect of real sexual child abuse. This diagnostic inference gives the psychohistorian the satisfactory impression of possessing the key

explanation of the historical fact. This use of psychoanalysis, however, is contrary to one of the major scientific principles of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic interpretation and explanation move retroactively from the present to the past and observe the multiple occurrences that produced the present. Psychoanalytic methods and principles, however, do not allow one to state that the primary experiences must necessarily have produced the present, nor to induce from similar present symptoms the action of the same past experiences. In my following case studies I will consciously avoid these traps. At any rate, the hypothesis of child abuse for a historical figure of demonic possession does not add to any understanding of the phenomenon, neither for psychohistory nor for clinical insight.

Another most hazardous aspect of psychohistory is what might be called "cultural lag". The ideas, emotions, and motives of the subjects cannot be isolated from the whole of the particular — and often foreign — cultural surrounding studied by cultural anthropology or history. In some way, cultural patterns represent a collective consciousness and a collective unconscious forming the subjects' motivations and interests, affective reactions, ideals, and idealizations. There is no psychology of the personality without reference to social psychology. In some cases, it is most difficult to distinguish subjective and collective psychology, as for example in the study of collective pathology or of violent social revolutions. In order to understand historical upheavals like the French Revolution or the Nazi coup d'état, historians must consider the psychological powers moving the masses, whether they be the dream of establishing a celestial Jerusalem on earth, the vengeful hatred of the enemy, or paranoid projections.

Benefits for Psychology

Psychohistory is a helpful exercise for psychology that normally works with living subjects. Turning to study subjects of other times is like going abroad to study subjects of other cultures. It obliges psychology to pay attention to the various social, cultural, or even geographical elements studied by other disciplines that in some way are related to the specific psychological object. This estrangement makes the psychologist conscious of the shortcomings of some psychology, where it pretends to explain phenomena according to psychological factors falsely considered innate since birth.

A second profit psychology can gain from psychohistory is a heightened consciousness of the many different modes of realizing human identity. Psychology normally tends to elaborate a unified theory

of the psychological factors and structures underlying observable variants. Psychohistory favors critical caution against over-extended theorizing. When achieved with vigilant attention to the multiple interconnected factors playing a role in behaviors and experiences, it warns the psychologist against the temptation to restore theoretical unity by reducing the disturbing phenomena to forms of pathology.

All of these conceptions must, in my view, be verified in the study of a phenomenon that has been most significant in former historical periods: demonic possession.

Demonism and Monotheism

A psychological study of "demonic possession" as we sometimes observe it today in Christianized populations shows how intensely the psychological factors contained therein are interwoven with beliefs transmitted from past generations and passed on through signifying words and icons. It is necessary for psychology to explore the history of these beliefs and to identify in the historical process the psychological factors and the transformations they underwent under the influence of non-psychological causes. When practiced on concrete data, psychohistory is indeed psychological analysis of historical phenomena and history of the psychological transformation of people.

Demonic Powers Dwelling in the Human World

In the belief systems of many ancient cultures, demons dwelt in the world and in humans. By "demons" I mean supernatural beings, often inferior deities or spirits, also called genies, some of them malignant, and many of them ambiguous. As with all beliefs and behaviors, the scientific mind goes as far as possible towards explaining this impressive phenomenon. This is no less true of psychology. And when interpretation comes to a halt at some riddle or enigma, the limits of reason do not by themselves justify the introduction of supernatural causes. This is precisely what people do when elaborating their belief in demons. Demons give shape and expression to important experiences, and they also serve an etiological function. The philosophical mind interprets the experiences differently; science takes the place of demonological etiology. Psychology in its turn tries to explain the formation of demonological belief. Still, the scientific principle should not encourage psychology to over-extend its competence.

A second important principle in psychology is to recognize that beliefs constitute an important factor in the assessment and behavior of

human individuals. Consequently, for psychology important beliefs are always significant factors in the ensemble of explanatory causalities.

In most ancient civilizations religion penetrates the whole sphere of existence, to the extent that no realm of either public or private life is really profane in the modern sense. As Mircea Eliade (1949) has stressed, the symbolic and ritually enacted choice of sacred places, times, objects, and persons is the means for signifying the sacred, which is virtually omnipresent in those civilizations. Consider, for example, ancient Greek religion: the divine reality unfolds itself in a disparate range of separate divinities which are more or less cosmic and psychic powers, rather than personal supernatural beings transcending nature and men. Nor, however, are they simply immanent, dwelling in man's world. Just like the powers they personify, these divinities are in a sense mixed with the whole of life and of nature. When sacred forces invade human beings and produce their ravishment of erotic love or of aesthetic pleasure, then they are called demons (daimons). This word ranks these supernatural forces below the somewhat distinctly personified divinities. Demons in ancient Greece are either benevolent, like Eros, or malevolent, like the Furies.

In many ancient civilizations, the human mind and affectivity is felt to be open to the action of demons and divinities — just as nature is open to them. It seems normal then, that some people are thought to be invaded by spirits. In many areas, possession is even sought out, ritually prepared, and ritually provoked. Shamanism is a widespread phenomenon in the East and among Native Americans. The shaman is a man who during his initiation goes through different crises of possession, which cause periods of mental disorder and awful experiences of anxiety produced by the demonic world he enters. In this way he is initiated into the sphere of demonic powers, learns to master these ambivalent supernatural entities, and is able to deal with them on equal terms. These possession-experiences are so dreadful and seem so contrary to human reason that many observers concluded that the shamans suffer from profound personality disorder, whether hysterical, epileptic or psychotic (Radin, 1937; Bateson & Mead, 1942; Devereux, 1956). More attentive and less rationally prejudiced observers claim that most shamans are in good psychic health and that the brutal initiation experiences serve precisely to test their capacity for sustaining the transgressive voyage into the demonic sphere (Lewis, 1971).

Ritual possessions are widespread in the African areas of Rhodesia and Sudan and were transported into Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Brazil. Often, in order to be as beneficial as possible, these possessions require submission to a strictly regulated initiation

comparable with shamanistic initiation. Careful observations done with clinical psychological instruments, among others, show that in culturally troubled areas the persons capable of the possession experience are in better psychological health than those who are not (Bogaert Garcia, 1992).

The possessions evoked are manifestly complex psychological phenomena produced by the subjects on the basis of cultural beliefs. It is precisely because the possessions themselves are obviously intense exceptional psychological experiences and manifestations, and not only conscious beliefs, that many observers have attempted to explain them by using psychopathological concepts. These concepts refer to pathologically abnormal mental and affective states, and observable pathological expressions do indeed show some similarities with the evoked possessions. But shamanistic and other ritual possessions are not pathological with reference to their own cultural surroundings. They are not diagnosed as such by their own populations. And the Western observer who is able to distinguish real and apparent psychopathology discovers that these people function normally in their surroundings, whereas others who do not are cast out. The psychohistorical problem of these non-pathological possessions is consequently that of the relation between a collective, culturally determined mode of thought and emotional behavior, and personal psychological processes that show a similarity with psychopathological structures and processes we know from the clinical experience of hysteria, epilepsy, and psychotic hallucination.

The idea that there is a relationship between the collective mind and the psychological processes involved in possession implies a psychological affinity existing between them. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's identification of "primitive" modes of thought as "magico-religious" should be applied here. Lévy-Bruhl also used the term "pre-rational" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1922). I would use this qualification as referring to a mode of relating with nature where a person feels intuitively in close union with the natural powers that affect him; at that same time, the person also lends these powers a kind of personification. Of course, such people are not pre-rational in all their behavior. Such a rash conclusion is a mistake Lévy-Bruhl himself made and retracted (1949). And precisely because it is psychologically human, the pre-rational mode of thought is not absent of all rationality. When Claude Lévi-Strauss confronted Lévy-Bruhl with his description of the rationality of primitive man, he emphasized that the primitive collective mind operates with concrete imagery (Levi-Strauss, 1962, p. 48). Contrary to the way conceptual representations create a neutralized distance with

things, these images are close to the affective state of union with the surrounding world.

The ancient, prescientific world was full of irruptions of the marvelous or the awesomely supernatural. The enigmatic features in natural facts were perceived as a supernatural presence, not because reason was in search of an explanation, but rather because one was intuitively conscious of not being the fountainhead of the world. Along with this intuition, the mode of one's mind, less rationally distant and less self-conscious, made one apt to experience oneself as one with the marvelous and the awesome. It is normal that some people had an intense desire to be one with these forces, even with the ambiguous ones. To be sure, my brief psychohistorical interpretation does not comprise an exhaustive explanation of the origin of these religious concepts. The linguistic structuring of the mind certainly has been an essential element in it.

Religions inevitably change. I nevertheless surmise that the above psychohistorical data reveal a permanent element running through humanity and will contribute to the interpretation of possession in different cultural and religious contexts.

Bible

Any psychohistory of possession experiences must take into account the influence of the specific religious notion of biblical monotheism. According to the biblical religion, God indeed established himself as such in his address to Moses in the 13th century B.C.E. He revealed himself as personal, one, absolutely transcendent, and initiator of a personal and very special covenant with his people. The psychohistory may try to interpret the advent of this profound change in the religious belief system. I fear it will not explain how humanity came to bypass previous beliefs in such a manner that God is identified by characteristics that are no longer immediately psychological: personal, free, the subject of linguistic enunciation. Freud calls these characteristics "spiritualization", opposing the linguistic order against that of psychological drives. At any rate, as far as we are concerned here, we must recognize that the biblical recognition of the divine identity was bound to transform the representations and psychological significance of demons. For the sake of clarity, in what follows, when referring to the God of biblical monotheism and Christian belief I will always write "God" with a capital letter. This usage also respects the prevailing linguistic convention. For the god of biblical monotheism is a

unique personal being, and consequently the word "God" became a proper name.

It is worth noting that, first of all, God does not possess a human being but eventually "inhabits" him, and in doing so even frees him from powers that alienate him from himself. When God's spirit is said to come over a prophet and to compel him to speak, the Bible never suggests that the prophet's identity is stolen from him. He is free to obey and to speak, and what he says is the revelation of God's meaningful judgment and outlook on the future initiative in favor of the believers.

In the population that adheres to this God but still shares with the surrounding culture a common way of viewing nature, the advent of monotheism does not simply suppress the beliefs in demons. The world of the people of the Bible is full of demons, protective personal companions, mysterious ambiguous demons, telluric powers ("Leviathan", "Behemoth"), as well as evil and harmful demons. All spirits, however, are created by the one God, who maintains his lordship over them even when he lets them be free. No evil spirit is an autonomous anti-God, as can be found in the dualistic beliefs of the surrounding cultures that heavily influenced the demonology of the Bible. Radical evil could only be the revolt against God as God. The biblical tradition indeed identified a demon as being essentially an evil one: Satan, the one who was condemned by God but not annihilated. His influence on humans is very specific. The Bible reserves for him the words "to tempt, the tempter, the temptation", or words that are synonymous with them: seducer, seduction, to seduce. The other spirits may inflict us with suffering, just as does nature. Actually, they cause suffering from within nature. In these cases, the Bible says that God puts human beings to the test in order to see whether they will remain faithful and confident. In some texts we observe a significant passing over from the common demonological language to the specifically biblical language about Satan. In the book of *Job*, for example, the demon is first the one belonging to the court of the Lord and is allowed to put Job to the test; in the end the tester becomes the satanic tempter.

The story of the Garden of Eden and of the Fall is paradigmatic for the transformation monotheism imposed on the demonology omnipresent in ancient civilizations. From the words of the serpent demon we may infer that in Eden there were neither tears nor death and that in the absence of suffering people could not be "tested" by God himself. However in this context a demon, clothed as a mythical serpent, is converted into the tempter. He is the third personal being who, appealing to sensual pleasures, clearly seduces Eve to revolt against

God as God. The serpent-seducer incites a denial of the truth of God's words, and the thought that humans are as divine as God and consequently are immortal. Later the book of *Wisdom* (2.24) and the Christian tradition explicitly identify the tempter-seducer in Eden as Satan, masked in myth.

The Eden story is a very interesting object for psychohistory. Of course, it is not a historical fact. The story is a historical religious conception of history, and this conception had a great impact on the history of Western humanity. Psychology can help clarify it.

Psychology cannot *explain* monotheistic belief. Now the representation of the tempter is dependent on this belief. Despite this limitation, we can still ask the question why the biblical tradition formed and introduced the satanic tempter. The Eden story shows us, I think, that along with the realization of having a relation to God, human consciousness also became aware of a most radical evil, an evil of which other civilizations had no conception: the evil consisting in transgressing moral and religious laws by positing oneself as a divine Lord. The idea itself is so radical that it seemed not to have its origin in humanity itself. For just as God radically transcends nature, so radical evil must be more radical than the moral evil formed by our psychological nature. For people living in biblical times, Satan represented in the sphere of the imagination what they themselves, as monotheists, obscurely felt, desired, and feared as the ultimate possible sin against God. We may think here of what the ancient Greeks acknowledged as *hubris*, preposterous human self-divinization. In the Bible, monotheistic belief charges this behavior with the radical understanding of personally opposing God. From a more rational perspective, the idea of the satanic devil could also function as an explanation for the origin of a sin that otherwise is simply absurd, a sin radically contrary to the God whom the believer confesses as otherwise inexplicable.

The phantasmic nature of these representations manifests itself in inner contradictions. These are similar to the phantasms psychoanalysis has often observed when analyzing dream-thoughts and delusions. Those living in Eden do not suffer death, but they desire to be immortal, knowing that immortality is a typically divine quality. Such people are completely happy but still feel that they lack divine fullness.

Significantly, just before reporting the beginning of Jesus' public life, the Gospels place the supernatural event of his identification with God together with his reception of God's Spirit. Then follows the temptation by Satan. The tempter very clearly incites him to auto-divinization, in opposition to the attitude of the special beloved Son he

has been declared by God to be. The Gospels further describe Jesus as viewing his work as a great combat with the evil spirit, who takes away the seeds Jesus sows in hearts and minds (Matt. 8.33), instigates the treachery of Judas, and is from the beginning the liar who perverts the minds of Jesus' Jewish enemies (John 8.44). In his confrontation with Jesus, the satanic devil shows what he is according to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheistic belief about the angel who in his pride tried to usurp the position of God, and who incites the faithful to make the same revolt.

The Gospels also report another sort of battle that Jesus took up with the demon by casting him out of people. Manifestly, these people were not possessed by Satan himself. In cases of expulsion, the nature of the devils is that of common demons who were the object of belief in the Bible as well as in many other religious contexts: evil spirits causing all kinds of illnesses, paralyses, deafness, as well as evil spirits mentally disturbing the subjects they possess, making them violent, suicidal, or mad. With respect to these possessed people Jesus behaves as a healer. Moreover, in parallel texts Jesus is described simply as "healing" the person. The way Jesus acts seems to correspond with what the suffering people themselves think and what they also expect from Jesus, as from other healers.

To this representation of the devil and of his evil work I would apply the same interpretation as to the belief in demons I have already commented on. Jesus and the contemporary witnesses obviously did share with the biblical and the whole ancient culture the belief in demons. However the natural powers of the sun, the sea, and the desert were no longer viewed as mysterious places of nearly immanent demons. Monotheism and the belief in creation demythologized the world. But wherever nature is troubled, such as in human illness, people then perceived a more or less personified power who acted contrary to well-ordered creation. In the pre-scientific worldview, the creationist confession permitted the belief in demons to endure in cases of negative experiences. What we observe here concurs with what we noticed in the Eden story: suffering and mortal illness are not viewed as natural. This illusory thought was universally produced by human desire, and creationist belief sustained and strengthened it. Within this context, the illusion of desire was taken to mean punishment for sin against God. A sinner was seen as acting in collusion with the tempter.

No wonder that the same notions leading to analogous practices of the expulsion of malevolent demons are to be found throughout the history of popular Christianity and popular Islam (Aouattah, 1993). In Christian cultures, there was always some degree of theological

justification for such interpretations and actions, to be found in reference to Jesus' words and actions, which were viewed as definitely divine, notwithstanding the presence of clearly human and culturally shaped notions and behaviors.

In what follows, I will not come back to the modes of possession which I have just mentioned. We may see them as the Christian or Islamic modes of what Lévy-Bruhl has called primitive magico-religious thought. Suffice it to say, the enlightened mind would be naive to think that rational scientific education surmounts such thinking quickly or easily! Against the background of this universal demonology there is a distinct demonic phenomenon in Christian history that commands the specific interest of psychohistory: possession by a demon of satanic nature. With respect to this subject matter, psychohistory can use the insight brought about by the scientific study of clinical cases. For this reason, I will first consider possession according to contemporary experience. History may then help us to also render a psychological interpretation of the differences between these contemporary cases and cases that occurred in the past.

Possession in Contemporary Christianity

The following description and interpretation are based on confidential documents from exorcists appointed by the church, as well as on personal clinical experience.

Applications are regularly made to the exorcists of the dioceses of Western Europe by people who are convinced they are possessed, perhaps confirmed in this conviction by a psychiatrist, and sometimes sent by a psychiatrist who feels powerless before the impressive "diabolic" behavior of his patient. The symptoms can indeed be dreadful. They are of four types. *Somatic*: feelings of extreme cold or warmth, cramps, diarrhea, blocked respiration, headache, loss of weight; sometimes more spectacular: the persons feel their body being heavily beaten, or thrown upright as if by an electric discharge. *Affective*: the persons sometimes utter bestial sounds and grimace with bestial brutality; they suffer nightmares, are overwhelmed by horrifying feelings of jealousy, revenge, hatred, also against themselves, and they even contort their bodies dangerously; most generally they feel condemned to hell by a merciless God. *Ethical*: some give themselves up to drugs, desire intensely to inflict harm, feel heavily tempted to destroy, and are obsessed by ideas they judge obscene. *Religious*: the persons suffer from invincible amnesia concerning religious truths, prayers, and rituals, feel violent hostility against religion, are tempted to

violate the sacred host and sometimes do so; when in church in order to pray they launch rivers of blasphemies against God, doubting afterwards whether they really did cry them out. A most strange fact is that some feel tempted, albeit with terror, to write in their own blood a covenant with the devil; they eventually do it, even repeatedly, in order to gain peace of mind and one or another area that they desire.

Among the possessed there are as many men as women, including many well-educated people. Outside their crises of possession most of them seem to behave normally. They are not psychotic, like those afflicted with "demonopathy". In their crises, they suffer severely in body and mind. At the start of the series of crises, this suffering leads some to think with secret pleasure that they have been elected by God to share the redemptive sufferings of Jesus. Very soon, however, they wonder what evil they might have committed that merits such a cruel torture imposed by God. At the dim border of consciousness, the figure of the torturing devil and of a bad "God" blend. However, at other times the possession itself already seems to be a divine punishment, even a definitive condemnation.

In spite of his or her religious despair, the possessed has an obscure sense that he (she) needs help. He (she) feels very ashamed, keeps his (her) torments secret, and applies to a psychotherapist or to an exorcist only with great hesitation. As far as I know, in most European countries the exorcist most generally sends the possessed to a therapist, while advising him or her to also seek competent spiritual guidance.

In some cases, psychoanalytical therapy rather quickly dispels the crises and shakes the person's conviction that he is possessed. Actually, the person who accepts the advice of the exorcist, as most of them do, and starts a therapy, already entertains some doubt in the back of his mind. His or her conviction is as ambiguous as are the unconscious motivations producing the possession experience. As a matter of fact, before embracing the idea of being possessed, the person already suffered vaguely from several of the typical symptoms I have described. When in a moment of anxious confusion the person reads or hears the word "devil" or "possession" in a somewhat religious context, she or he suddenly "understands" what was secretly going on in her (him). He or she adopts for himself (herself) that belief with relief, secret narcissism, and terror. The belief allows him or her to produce the symptoms overtly. What the devil cries out and does in the person against God and his church is what he (she) himself (herself) has sometimes felt and thought in a hidden part of himself (herself). And the feelings of rage and hatred and the destructive impulses had also secretly swept over him. In simple words — words that today are

sufficiently known, even if not fully understood in their technical sense — the devil expresses for him what was and is going on within himself but has been repressed. Hence a feeling of relief together with fear and guilt. By taking on the devil as a sort of inner hero, he (she) too can live out ideas of grandeur, of almost semi-divine and anti-divine grandeur. All of these ideas and feelings, in their torturous complexity, often require long therapeutic work, although the conviction of being possessed may rapidly be overcome.

According to the principles exposed in the first part of my study, I will now examine whether psychology can cast its light on possession in Christian history. I will consider the centuries in which the phenomenon apparently occurred regularly; the centuries from which we have documents at any rate.

In the 16th and 17th Centuries

Before the 19th century, observers had practically no choice but to interpret possession experiences as cases of real diabolic possession; the specific identity of psychic reality was not isolated and recognized until the end of the 19th century. To interpret these apparently enigmatic and evil behaviors, the sole hypothesis available to the people of earlier centuries was built from the theological concept of diabolic actions alienating these persons from their true nature. Seeing that the significant expressions were demonic, the observer could only conclude that the agent must be supernatural, but not divine, for God does not alienate man from himself. The observed behavior was manifestly a madness that was seen or interpreted as being opposed (and often was in its expressions) to God. Now the observers were a priori convinced that the devil still caused much suffering as well as mental abnormalities, just as he did in the people Jesus met and dealt with. The meaningful manifestations of the possessed could only be seen as having been produced by the diabolic agent they apparently made it possible to perceive.

For a psychological interpretation of such a complex psychological and religiously meaningful phenomenon, humanity had to wait for very late modernity, when scientific thinkers like Freud conceived of the psyche as a specific reality functioning according to its own lawful regularities. Recognition of the specific identity of psychic reality was the result of the relatively recent application of the scientific mind to the dimension of the human being that mediated between reason, which functions according to the laws of logic and grammar, and the organic body, which functions according to the laws of biology. This

recognition was all the more difficult because it involved the complex combination of two modes of thought: interpretation of meaning and explanation by causality. Until the end of the 19th century, it was the idea of diabolic possession that could combine both modes of understanding; working behind and in opposition to the person's consciousness, the devil causes religiously aberrant thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

At the end of the Middle Ages, especially between 1550 and 1650, an epidemic of suspicion of sorcery occurred in several European Catholic and Protestant countries. Most of the victims were women. A great many of them were judged and condemned by church inquisitors and by civil courts of justice, then tortured and executed by the civil governments. They were accused both of having sexual relationships with the devil and of exercising malevolent magical influence on the harvest, livestock, and relationships between people.

Consideration of a well-documented case may help explain the importance and meaning of this terrible phenomenon in Christian history. (I refer to the volume *Satan* from the *Etudes Carmélitaines*, pp. 380-385.) In the 17th century, Anne de Chartraine was accused of sorcery and dragged before a court of justice. She was said to have used her sorcerer's magical power for healing and drawing profit from it, for poisoning people or animals, and for stealing and starting fires. When tortured, she firmly denied having used sorcerer's power, but she "cynically" confessed (report of the secretary of justice) having engaged in lesbian sexual pleasures, including with her devils. She also "cynically" recognized having taken part in wild diabolical voyages and having then copulated intensely with devils. When condemned to death, she declared herself happy to die as a way of doing penance for her diabolic sins. Witnesses of the process reported observing no sign of a troubled mind as she answered the judges' questions; apparently she was not delirious.

I suppose this case to be somewhat paradigmatic. The practice of magic was widespread, certainly in the rural areas where most of those judged to be sorcerers were found. As in all civilizations, magical power is ambiguous and so are the sorcerers. In Christian areas, the magic and thus the demonic power is normally interpreted as having been provided by the evil seducer. The shadow of Satan falls over the whole of demonology. Meanwhile, in Christian areas the devil was also viewed as the demon who incites people to the anti-mystical pleasures of sexual licentiousness. Even the Desert Fathers of the 4th century, fleeing the sexual corruption of a decadent Roman world and preferring to live in harsh asceticism, suffered from tempting diabolic "visions".

Sexual pleasures were also presented to them as a remedy for their depressive *acedia*. In this context, the original spiritual satanic arrogance of self-divinization is converted into a more human temptation: the devil seduces his victim to oppose God's moral authority and spiritual exigencies. Considering all these data, my hypothesis is that Anne de Chartraine was sincere when she confessed her "diabolic" sins. Experiencing a kind of hallucination, she enacted what she secretly desired. In the same way, the visions of the Desert Fathers can and should also be interpreted as tempting hallucinations. As for the sorcerers, they were convinced they had the powers they were imagined to have. In their diabolic voyages, the sorcerers thus enacted with pleasure and with more imagination what the Desert Fathers in their hallucinations saw as tempting and somewhat desirable possibilities against which they had to fight.

As for the judges, they surely did believe their accusations. They shared the convictions that some sorcerers themselves confessed. And they did fear what must have been widely but subconsciously desired pleasures — pleasures thought to be dangerous for society, when liberated.

Cases of diabolic possession without sorcery are different. Besides, they occurred more frequently some decades later, in cities and among more educated people, including clerics and nuns. I will again consider a specific case, that of Sr. Jeanne de Ferry, who died in Mons, Belgium in 1620 and whose case is laid out in *Satan*, pp. 386-419. The account of this case was published in Louvain shortly after her confession. While still a child, she was handed over by her father to the power of the devil. The devil seduced her, presenting himself as a handsome young man, gratifying her with sweets and promising more of them. He convinced her to write different pacts with him; some he kept, others she had to swallow up with an orange or a sweet. The devil became multiple demons, forcing her to give herself over to all kinds of pleasure. They threatened to torture her if she refused and they forced her with violence to refuse communion and to launch blasphemies at the sacred host and at the "false God" hanging on the cross like a criminal. The girl nevertheless entered the convent of the Black Sisters (Soeurs Noires), completed her preparation for vows and took them. Meanwhile, she continued her demonic practices, giving her soul and body to the power of the demons. These became more and more cruel. They came into her body and also made atrocious incisions in her "precious parts". They finally pushed Jeanne to make an attempt on her own life. However, her fellow sisters were alarmed at her alternating crises of arrogance and of anxiety, and by her deteriorating health.

Priests were consulted who forced Jeanne through moral arguments to confess her secret life. Exorcists conducted repeated sessions of exorcism. After backsliding several times into demonic crises, Jeanne was liberated when the devil-father, the first of the many possessing devils, was finally expelled. At that time, Jeanne took the exorcist as her father. The following phases of amnesia and aphasia and Jeanne's return to "the simplicity of a child, ignorant of everything she once knew about God and his creatures" was viewed as confirmation of the supernatural character of the whole event. Being a victim and not a sorcerer, Jeanne was exorcised, not condemned to the cruel death that must redeem the soul of the sorcerer. The efficacy of the exorcism in Jeanne's case, as in many others possessed in the 17th century, was for the whole society a manifest demonstration of the reality of the diabolic seducer as well as of the victorious divine power of the church over him. Convinced of this power, the church went so far as to include in the ritual of exorcism an injunction addressed to the devil to leave his victim. And obeying the divine majesty, often after having resisted it, the devil would leave — he who by definition was conceived of as the fallen angel who disobeys God. With respect to the devil, the theological logic is diabolically mysterious!

The exorcism was generally efficacious. Contrary to what contemporary people often think, exorcism was a ritual that took a long time, often several months or more. The repetition of the ritual was an exhausting struggle for the exorcist, who had to prepare himself by asceticism and prayer and who fought with the possessed mentally and tenaciously in order to bring them gradually to confess their hidden complicity with the devil. Spiritually, the exorcism amounted to a religious conversion. This is most extensively set out in the case of Jeanne des Anges of Loudun (Soeur Jeanne des Anges, 1985; de Certeau, 1970). And with respect to the long and difficult technique fostering acknowledgment on the side of the possessed, the psychologist following Freud can see in it a form of psychotherapy disguised as a work of liberation from the enslaving diabolic unconscious.

Compared with today's possessions, those of the 17th century were more abundant in sexual pleasures. We can thus observe a gradual progress in interiorization from the sorcerer to the possessed of the 17th century and then to the contemporary possessed. In the sorcerer, the devil is specifically immoral, and he invests the desiring imagination; there the devil is the name for the hallucinatory power of desire, creating apparently real implementations. In the exorcised possessed, the devil is sexually licentious but is already very explicitly hostile toward God. And the possessed person inwardly identifies himself with

the devil as the figure of this unconscious revolt; his identification is so intense that a long process of psychological spiritual working through is necessary. In the contemporary possessed, the devil is preponderantly the evil anti-God. There the sexual content is far less important. I think this is because in the contemporary world sexual morality is more varied and consequently more open. What is more important today, it seems to me, is the influence, not always clearly outspoken, of a widespread ideological opposition to belief in God. It is significant that those who suffer possession are themselves in a state of hesitation, as if for them it is as pre-enlightened and shameful to believe in the devil as to believe in God. The progress of interiorization is also manifest in the feeling of guilt. Obscurely, the possessed feel the suffering of the possession itself as divine punishment.

The progress in psychological interiorization that we have observed here must be connected with the same anthropological turn to subjectivity that we see in philosophy, literature, and the invention of psychology. Psychohistory recognizes the gradual Western discovery of the psychological dimension of human nature. This more psychological mode of thought in the whole evolution of culture has changed the features of possession, as indeed it has of many other phenomena.

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