



Possession, exorcism and psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This paper investigates the historiographical utility of psychoanalysis, focussing in particular on retrospective explanations of demonic possession and exorcism. It is argued that while ‘full-blown’ psychoanalytic explanations—those that impose Oedipus complexes, anal eroticism or other sophisticated theoretical structures on the historical actors—may be vulnerable to the charge of anachronism, a weaker form of retrospective psychoanalysis can be defended as a legitimate historical lens. The paper concludes, however, by urging historians to look *at* psychoanalysis as well as trying to look through it. Full-blown psychoanalysis is a bad historical lens but it may, in some cases, be an excellent explanatory template: a thorough understanding of how psychoanalytic therapy functions in the modern world is, for example, a good theoretical preparation for historians seeking to understand the sixteenth-century’s demonological universe.

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1.

In 1596, thirteen-year-old Thomas Darling blamed his possession by Satan on an old woman and a fart. ‘As I passed by her in the Coppice, I chanced (against my will) to let a scape; which shee taking in anger sayd, *Gyp with a mischiefe, and fart with a bell: I will goe to heaven, and thou shalt goe to hell;* and forthwith she stooped to the ground’.¹ This, at least, is the account Thomas gave his grandparents,

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¹ Denison (1597), p. 4.

whose ward he was. They had already settled on a diagnosis of demonic possession: the boy was plagued by fits in which he thrashed about, screamed, cursed God and the Church, and abused his family. Small transgressions earned sharp rebukes in respectable Elizabethan households, but holding a Christian child morally responsible for behaviour like *this* was out of the question. The old woman was identified, hauled in front of the Derby Justices, and thrown in jail for suspected witchcraft. (She died before she could be sentenced.)²

Possession cases often attract psychoanalytically inclined historians, and it is not hard to see why.³ Firstly, ‘gain from illness’ interpretations seem almost to write themselves: not only did Thomas Darling’s possession give him a *carte blanche* on outrageous misconduct, but his eventual deliverance would be taken as proof of his fundamental godliness, with points for piety being awarded in rough proportion to the brutality of the demonic assault. Properly exploited, the concept of ‘possession’ could turn the moral world of childhood on its head, and positively encourage the free venting of long repressed impulses. Secondly, many of the classic symptoms of possession—convulsions, paralysis, strange anaesthesias—are also classic symptoms of hysteria, one of the staple pathological categories of psychoanalysis.⁴ Thirdly, the patchiness of the historical record is in one sense an advantage: psychoanalytic accounts of particular episodes can be constructed on the basis of a few tit-bits of juicy information, without much fear of subsequent falsification.

This last point is not wholly a cynical one. Psychoanalysis, perhaps more than other methods of historical enquiry, thrives in an environment of scattered clues (its methodological affiliation with the ‘Sherlock Holmes’ detection paradigm has frequently been pointed out, most famously by Carlo Ginzburg⁵). Freud himself wrote a psychoanalytic biography of Leonardo da Vinci based largely on one childhood memory fragment, and counted it amongst his favourite compositions.⁶ But the ‘scattered clues’ defence of the historiographical utility of psychoanalysis should not be pushed too far. Clues may *appear* to be no less scattered in the analysis chamber than in the library stacks, but the scattering mechanisms are crucially different: while a patient’s bizarre leaps of association are valuable clues in their own right, the complex processes of historical transmission will usually be external to the psychoanalytic problem. To put it another way, in psychoanalysis proper there will always be glue between the clues. In history, there may not be.⁷

Do sober epistemological reflections like these stand any chance against a good

² The narrative is drawn from Denison, and from the summary in Rickert (1962).

³ See, for example, Roper (1994), Ch. 8; Demos (1982), especially pp. 115–131; Freud (1990c).

⁴ No attempt will be made to ‘match up’ past and present pathology categories in the present essay, but it should be noted that the disappearance in recent decades of the ‘conversion hysterics’ studied by Freud if anything *strengthens* the parallel with possession: both forms of madness must be culturally contingent.

⁵ Ginzburg (1989).

⁶ Freud (1990b).

⁷ Faced with a psychoanalytic close-reading of a historical episode, the sceptical historian can almost always complain that ‘[f]or an adequately refined analysis . . . we need more information’ (Cantor, 1999, p. 318).

story? Let us return to Thomas Darling: ‘I chanced (against my will) to let a scape’. A scape is a fart. But two other meanings were current in the late sixteenth century—‘escape’ and ‘moral transgression’.⁸ Etymologically, one can imagine the vulgar meaning originating in a fairly literal combination of the other two, and here, one might say, Thomas’s psyche trod a similar path. Thomas fantasised (or retrospectively emphasised) the story of the fart because it is, on the ‘gain from illness’ interpretation, a near perfect statement of the unconscious logic of possession. ‘I chanced (against my will) to transgress’, and furthermore, ‘I chanced (against my will) to escape moral responsibility’. The blame has to go somewhere, of course, and Thomas’s encounter with the old woman now looks very much like the necessary transaction. Thomas’s scape scaped out of his backside and onto the ground, to be picked up by the stooping witch (in exchange for a curse). We might push it one notch further, and conjecture that Thomas knew the Biblical story of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16)—in which case the witch herself gets caught up in the word play.⁹ What do we get out of all this? At the very least, we get a neat chain of metonymic imagery with internal aesthetic appeal and a strong psychoanalytic flavour. For a literary theorist, that might be enough. At the very most—and this should interest a historian—we illuminate Thomas Darling’s odd little speech, and chalk it up as a piece of unexpected evidence for the ‘gain from illness’ account of possession.

This essay will explore the historiographical relevance of psychoanalysis. It is structured around two organising metaphors: psychoanalysis as lens (Sections 1–3), and psychoanalysis as template (Sections 4–5). I argue that historians can benefit by looking through psychoanalysis, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by looking at it. Inevitably, I will say more about psychoanalysis than about possession. But historical illustrations like the Darling case are important. They remind us that psychoanalytic history can produce very compelling narratives, and they raise the question of what historians should be doing with them.

2.

There are two objections to psychoanalytic history which we will not be discussing in detail. Firstly, since psychoanalysis is peculiarly sensitive to small details of wording, the question of source reliability is particularly pressing. Thomas Darling may never have used the word ‘scape’. Maybe he said ‘fart’. The chronicler, local pastor John Denison, had an interest in presenting the boy in a pious light, and so recorded the less vulgar synonym. This worry certainly casts doubt on the mini-analysis given above. In principle, however, it could be overcome by careful historical scholarship. Other sources might be found to give independent confirmation of Denison’s transcription. We might learn more of Thomas Darling’s character, and decide that he really *was* a pious child, unlikely to have used vulgar language in the presence of

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁹ The word ‘scapegoat’ first appeared in the Tindale Bible of 1530 (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

his grandparents (except during fits). Further investigation might support my psychoanalytic speculation, or refute it, or just fail to turn up any new sources and leave it untouched. The point is that these kinds of source assessment problems are encountered in any historical research project. If they are more difficult for the psychoanalytically inclined historian, then his job is harder—but that in itself does not make the approach invalid.

The second obstacle to be skirted round is radical *general* scepticism about psychoanalysis. People who regard even clinical psychoanalysis as a worthless or fraudulent practice are not going to be impressed by psychoanalytic history; but their discomfort would not be a historiographical one. For the purposes of this essay I will take it as given that modern psychoanalytic therapy is ‘on to something’. The question is whether, and if so how, that ‘something’ is of use to historians.

In fact, of course, the question isn’t anything like that simple. The ‘something’ isn’t ‘some thing’ at all but a range of practices, ways of thinking and theoretical entities that all go under the heading of ‘psychoanalysis’. From a historian’s point of view, psychoanalysis presents a methodological pick-and-mix. ‘Psychoanalytic history’—a phrase I have already used repeatedly without much in the way of qualification—covers a very diverse range of approaches to the past. Some of those approaches are more controversial than others. Many, perhaps most, historians who have written on possession take the ‘gain from illness’ interpretation seriously, at least for those cases (there are many) where the victims were children from particularly religious families. Such historians would not necessarily regard themselves as psychoanalytically inclined.¹⁰ One can recognise that demonic possession provided a way for the pious to give vent to repressed feelings of rage towards their religion, and even countenance some talk of unconscious motivation, without becoming a Freudian (though it would be difficult to deny *some* Freudian influence). Importantly, that recognition can be made at a high level of generalisation, without detailed attention to particular case histories. Writers who attempt to recover the subjective experience of possessed *individuals*, on the other hand, tend to be more overtly psychoanalytic: as the narrative focus sharpens, the theoretical level escalates. Lyndal Roper’s work on German witchcraft is perhaps the best recent example of this kind of history.¹¹

A first-resort defence of this methodological trend might run as follows: (1) any subtly nuanced account of human experience must respect the importance of metaphor and symbolic representation in general in ordering psychic life; (2) the size and potential connective complexity of that representation space is, in principle (i.e. pre-theoretically), enormous; therefore, (3) reconstructing the subjective experience of historical actors is impossible without the guidance of a relatively sophisticated psychological theory. What this argument shows is that to reach *some* stable picture

¹⁰ See, for example, Thomas (1971), pp. 480–481; Sharpe (1996), pp. 202–203; Midelfort (1999), pp. 72–73, 79. Midelfort in particular is unsympathetic towards psychoanalytic history (pp. 2–7).

¹¹ See n. 3.

of subjective experience one needs *some* theory; it doesn't show that psychoanalysis is the *correct* theory (still less that any particular reconstruction is a faithful one).

Of course, in our everyday lives, we each already have and use a psychological theory; it is essential for any kind of social existence. The justification for 'folk psychology'—were we to ask for one—would presumably be some combination of predictive success and explanatory power, and of those at least the latter is relevant historiographically. We impose folk psychological categories like 'desire' and 'belief' on historical actors because we have to: without them the historical record would be unintelligible. That is a serviceable argument, but I think there is a more fundamental one, and it begins by denying the literal truth of the last sentence. It is conceivable that an enormously complicated natural scientific theory might, when fed a historical text, generate reliable inferences about the conditions of that text's production. It is a logical possibility that it would do this purely at the level of atomic physics. Such a process would certainly be providing knowledge of the past, but unless subsequently translated into folk psychological vocabulary, few people would want to call it historical understanding. Historical understanding, as we use the term, is ultimately an act of communion with dead human beings: in a very loose sense, it is a social encounter. Folk psychological concepts aren't just *necessary for* that encounter—they are *constitutive of* it. If that is right, then the justificatory question does not arise; or rather, insofar as it does arise, one can wriggle out of it by a sort of transcendental argument.

That is an important conclusion, because the boundary between folk psychology and psychoanalysis is blurred. In its less ambitious manifestations, psychoanalytic history ought to piggy-back on the arguments of the previous paragraph. But we have already stressed the heterogeneous nature of psychoanalysis: which bits will survive the ride? Metaphoric and metonymic representation seem quite secure. Although psychoanalysis lays great emphasis upon them, they have always been ubiquitous in language and literature. Arguably, they are indispensable notions of folk psychology too. What about the unconscious? It would be difficult to claim that a shared acceptance of unconscious mentality is necessary for, or in any sense constitutive of, social experience. But we can legitimately appeal to the 'explanatory power' argument. If unconscious mental states turn out to be a convenient way of explaining the behaviour of historical actors, then we have as much (or at least the same kind of) justification for positing their existence in the past as we do in the present. They may not constitute an 'actors' category', but so what? Any historian who maintained that an awareness of the *concept* of the unconscious is a necessary condition for being causally influenced by an *instantiation* would be using the word 'unconscious' in a highly non-standard way. It seems, then, that historians—like everybody else—can take it or leave it when it comes to the notion of unconscious mental life, but it is hard to imagine that decision being a specifically *historiographical* one. And since the rejection of unconscious mentality in general would entail 'radical general scepticism' towards psychoanalysis, it is not an option that can be discussed in this essay.

Given the ubiquity of symbolic representation, and granted some tolerance of explanations involving unconscious mentality, it is but a small step to combine the

two. But to accept *that* is to accept that a chain of unconscious symbolic associations might legitimately be ascribed to a historical actor if the explanatory pay-off were high enough. In other words, it is to accept a crude sort of first-order, entity-bereft psychoanalysis—which brings us back to Thomas Darling and his scape. The mini-analysis I sketched in Section 1 is an example of the kind of analysis that is, I want to claim, straightforwardly defensible on the basis of the arguments presented in this section. We began with a fart, an escape, a sin, and a scapegoat. No sophisticated psychoanalytic entities were posited. The chain of associations was short, and the glue binding it together was strong (word identity). The hypothesised psychic process explained an otherwise rather odd episode in Denison's account, and supported an interpretation of Thomas Darling's possession that is independently plausible on general psychological grounds. Were such an analytical snippet to be offered within the context of a methodologically broad-based historical investigation of the Darling case, it is hard to see why any historian should want to exclude it. It seems to me that this sort of psychoanalysis—which I will be referring to as 'first-order psychoanalysis'—is a perfectly acceptable historical lens. Like all lenses, it may distort the reality at which it is directed, but that is an ever-present feature of historical research. The way of managing that distortion is, as always, to cross-correlate the views through as many different lenses as possible. One may then be led to discard an initially appealing psychoanalytic picture. But one may also find that the view through the psychoanalytic lens reveals a new and better way of marshalling the other evidence.

3.

The meaning of *first-order* psychoanalysis needs clarifying, and this is best done by illustrating what it is *not*. Let us imagine a more full-blooded psychoanalytic reading of the Darling fragment. Cued by the anal associations of 'fart', we might want to construct a little anal-erotic complex for Thomas. First, we would need to reinterpret his transaction with the witch in more bodily terms. 'As I passed by her' is but one preposition away from 'As I passed her'—i.e. 'As I digested her' or even 'As I excreted her'. Engaged in such ambitious witch-eating activity, it is perhaps understandable that Thomas could not contain his 'scape'. This causes additional offence to the half-eaten witch; by way of revenge (and being unable to eat Thomas), she eats the fart: 'which shee *taking* in anger . . .'. With dream-like illogic, the witch is soon free to 'stoop to the ground'—not to pick up the fart, but possibly to defecate it. So much for the textual analysis. There is a little supporting evidence in Denison's account: the first physicians to visit Thomas Darling diagnosed worms.¹² It is quite possible he had them, and it may have been a long-standing infection. In his 'Rat Man' case history, Freud ascribes the persistency of his patient's anal-erotic complex

¹² Denison (1597), p. 2.

to ‘a constant irritation due to worms’.¹³ A similar move is possible here. Furthermore, one might speculate that Thomas had frequently been chastised by his grandparents for scratching; if they were indeed frustrating an important sexual pleasure in this way, then Oedipal tension within the family may have been great. Thomas’s Oedipal feelings, of course, would long ago have been transferred to his grandparents, who, we can assume, had reached their late forties at least by the time of Thomas’s possession. The old woman accused by Thomas is most unlikely to have been older than sixty, since we know from Denison’s account that her mother was still alive. She may have been of a similar age to Thomas’s grandmother. The witch in Thomas’s story can then be seen as the grandmother who scolds Thomas for indulging in anal pleasure, but who is then sexually conquered (eaten and excreted) by Thomas. And her role is not entirely passive: by eating his scape she is legitimising Thomas’s principal source of sexual enjoyment. On that view the story of the fart is not (or not just) about the shrugging off of moral responsibility—it is an Oedipal fantasy. No surprise, then, that it should take place not in the untamed forest of supernatural fairytales, but ‘in the Coppice’—a small thicket of stunted trees, fully subject to the violence of the village, and denied full potency through periodic cutting.

I like that analysis but I don’t believe it. Reasons for scepticism in this particular case include familiar issues of source assessment: the words ‘passed’ and ‘taking’ occur in Denison’s report but might not have been uttered by Thomas. That was true of ‘scape’, too, but to a lesser degree. Assuming Denison was not being wilfully mendacious, Thomas’s story was about a fart—at least, that is the most superficially striking thing about it, and the feature most likely to survive transcription after the event. It was not so obviously a story about passing or about taking. Given Denison’s account alone, it seems fair to say that the probability that Thomas actually *said* ‘scape’ is higher than the probability that he said ‘passed’ and ‘taking’. The fragility of psychoanalytic clues when subjected to scrutiny of this sort is an important methodological point, but we have already ruled out drawing any general theoretical conclusions from it. For the purposes of this essay, a more important reason for being sceptical about the above analysis is to be found in the entities it deploys. We are granting the *existence* of the unconscious, but how should we talk about it? Should we speak in terms of anal eroticism and Oedipus complexes? Such talk certainly has psychotherapeutic efficacy in the modern world, arguably has explanatory power, and possibly refers to *something* that is universal in human beings. But how that something interacts with its social environment, and how important it is for determining, say, family psychodynamics, is surely culturally contingent. Just *how* contingent is an enormous question. The dependence may be weak, but if it is, it is not *obviously* weak. Maybe Elizabethan attitudes to toilet training, farting, bum scratching and hygiene were such that, though everyone had anal-erotic feelings of sorts, it was not something that children got het up about, and not something that people got complexes over. Maybe Elizabethan parents’ ways of relating to each other and to their

¹³ Freud (1990a), p. 93.

children were so different from ours that, though intra-family sexual tensions affected the development of young children, they did so in ways only poorly approximated by the Oedipus complex of standard Freudian theory. (Those two maybes are not rhetorical etiquette—both raise genuine questions, neither of which will be answered in this essay.) The general historiographical point is a simple one: when the dependable patterns of modern psychotherapy are reified into psychoanalytic entities and then applied to the past, there is always the risk of anachronism; and the anachronism risked is not even a particularly devious one, but presentism of a rather unexotic kind.¹⁴

Given that note of scepticism, we should briefly return to the question of unconscious mentality. I said earlier that explanatory considerations licensed historical and non-historical reference to the unconscious in the same way. I also said that rejecting all such references would amount to ‘radical general scepticism’ about psychoanalysis. To what extent can more sophisticated psychoanalytic entities benefit from such arguments? On the first issue, that of explanation, we have to be symmetrical. The retrospective application of categories such as the Oedipus complex *would* be straightforwardly warranted *if* the explanatory pay-off were comparable with that obtained in the analysis chamber. But it isn’t. The reason it isn’t is that what is being explained in the analysis chamber is to a large extent talk about Oedipus complexes, in which the explanans influences the explanandum in a (supposedly) therapeutic way. The concept of the Oedipus complex has great explanatory power in that situation. If that sounds like a trivial point, it is not meant to—it certainly does not hold for all psychological concepts. We will return to the psychotherapeutic encounter in Section 4. For now, let us just note that the explanatory power historians would be sacrificing if they abandoned all talk of unconscious mentality is much greater than anything that is at stake with respect to the Oedipus complex, or anal-eroticism, or Kleinian envy, or any other psychoanalytic entity; let us note also that this is *not* because ‘all talk of unconscious mentality’ is shorthand for the set of all such standard entities—that would be an utterly trivial claim—but because the notion of unconscious mentality is far more flexible than any fixed menu of complexes would suggest. One does not need to cite a complex to make explanatory use of a chain of unconscious associations. That, essentially, is also why scepticism about the historiographical application of psychoanalytic categories does not amount to ‘radical general scepticism’ about psychoanalysis: entity-scepticism leaves a methodological residue that is recognisably psychoanalytic. That residue is what I mean by ‘first-order psychoanalysis’.

I have argued that it is sometimes useful and legitimate to view the past through the lens of first-order psychoanalysis, but that if we try to peer through any full-blown psychoanalytic theory, we will have great difficulty convincing ourselves that the resulting image is not severely distorted. The positive part of that claim might

¹⁴ This is, for example, one of the worries Geoffrey Cantor has about psychohistory: ‘To what extent are twentieth-century studies of familial relationships relevant to understanding son-mother bonding (or lack thereof) in a British aristocratic family of the seventeenth century?’ (Cantor, 1999, p. 318).

be criticised for its timidity; the negative part, correspondingly, for its harshness. Are we really to declare most of what is usually understood as ‘psychoanalysis’ *worthless* for historians? The conclusion I draw from the discussion above is that ‘full-blown’ psychoanalysis is indeed of very little value *as a lens*. But lenses no more exhaust a historian’s toolbox than their literal counterparts exhaust the toolbox of a biologist. It is an open question whether full-blown psychoanalysis might not be useful in some other way. I am going to suggest that an understanding of how full-blown psychoanalysis functions in the modern world is an excellent theoretical preparation for understanding certain features of the sixteenth century’s demonological universe. That is, I want to change metaphor: from lens to template.

4.

If we can’t look *through* full-blown psychoanalysis, we can certainly look *at* it, and we can do so through the lens of first-order psychoanalysis. A good starting point is the (admittedly Freudian) view that the root of many mental maladies is an unresolved psychic conflict of some sort, raging outside the domain of conscious control, and, for all its ferocity, stuck in a long-term stalemate. There will of course be conscious ramifications (and, in the case of conversion hysterias, somatic symptoms); together these form the ‘public face’ of the illness. Such, then, is the initial state of the psychoanalytic patient. In the course of a successful analysis, the psychic conflict is ‘brought to consciousness’ and ‘resolved’, freeing the patient from his illness. How is this cure achieved? A psychoanalyst would point to the healing power of the *truth*. A neurosis is essentially an *intellectual* failing: to understand it is to be free of it. Psychoanalytic therapy is *Ideologiekritik* for the head. That what cures the patient is in the end an intellectual transformation is surely right, but whether *truth* is doing much explanatory work here is open to debate. It certainly isn’t immediately obvious that epistemic and therapeutic desiderata should coincide so neatly; a dissenting view might be that in the analysis chamber, ‘truth’ is just a sophisticated shorthand for therapeutic effectiveness. Freud himself tended to treat fantasy and reality rather symmetrically when reconstructing the aetiology of a neurosis, and one can easily imagine a yet looser notion of truth: ‘Did the patient ever *really, literally*, fantasise that?’ ‘Well, whether he did or did not, it is an excellent representation of the dominant psychic conflict of his childhood, and should lead to a breakthrough in the analysis’. There is a regression looming here: from reality, to patient’s fantasy-of-reality, to fantasy-of-fantasy, constructed by patient and analyst in collaboration, and so on. Exactly where on that axis a cut should be made to divide truth from fiction is unclear, but also uninteresting: there is no reason to suppose that either analyst or patient should care much about crossing it.

Can we give an account of the psychoanalytic cure *without* referring to truth? With one eye on the imminent question of possession and exorcism, here is my suggestion: in psychoanalysis, it is not truth that heals, but (certain sorts of) narratives. We can flesh this out in a way that respects the structure of the more orthodox picture outlined in the previous paragraph. For example, the notion that unresolved,

unconscious psychic conflict can express itself as a mental illness will be retained; it is the interpretation of the cure that must change. Whatever else happens in a successful psychoanalysis, there can be no doubt that the patient is presented with, and consciously absorbs, an emotionally compelling narrative (the analyst's interpretation of the patient's illness). Suppose its structure is such that unconscious symbolic associations in the patient's head bind elements of the narrative to elements within the unconscious psychic conflict (this is a first-order psychoanalytic hypothesis). Suppose further that the binding is strong enough to act as a causal link. One then has an extremely powerful therapeutic tool: conscious manipulations of the consciously held narrative result in corresponding changes in the pathological, unconscious material. The narrative provides a clinical interface to the illness. But what process, finally, effects the cure? The most natural answer is: the internal logic of the narrative. The mental illness is debilitating because the psychic conflict at its root is stalemated. The conscious narrative to which that conflict is coupled need not be—in fact, *must* not be if the coupling is to be of any use. It is by making the patient recognise unambiguous narrative closure that 'psychological closure' can be achieved.

What sort of narrative is appropriate? Evidently this must depend on the patient and on the illness. But what is more interesting for us is that it must also depend on the patient's cultural background. Cultures are awash with narratives—some might say they are constituted by them—and the attractiveness of anything offered by a therapist will be a function, in part, of how it fits into that narrative space. Probably the elements of the narrative must be to a large extent *drawn from* the host culture; certainly the criteria for closure must be. In the case of psychoanalysis, one might conjecture that its stories of repressible-but-ineradicable brute sexual urges could only have been therapeutically effective after the Darwinian animalisation of the human subject. Before then, perhaps, stories which explained patricidal hatred (say) in terms of sexual jealousy would have done no more than link one moral crime to another. What counts as narrative closure depends on what your culture recognises as a bottom line—on what it regards as the moral 'givens'.

This discussion was stimulated by psychoanalysis, but it has ended up situating it within a much broader (also, of course, much vaguer) theoretical framework. The basic ideas are that of a narrative space that is a function of culture, which is largely definitional, and the substantive claim that unconscious psychic conflicts can become coupled to consciously absorbed narratives.¹⁵ The latter process need not necessarily be therapeutic: one can imagine an initially healthy unconscious degenerating into pathological ambivalence due to interaction with an ambiguating narrative. In fact, given the much noted cultural instability of certain psychopathological categories—conversion hysteria, anorexia nervosa, or possession, for that matter—it is tempting to claim narrative coupling as a rather common feature of illnesses as well as cures.

¹⁵ Lyndal Roper has identified a challenge for psychoanalytic history: 'What is lacking . . . is a theory of how the psychic interacts with the social' (Roper, 1998, p. 270). Fully articulated, a theory of narrative coupling might go some way towards plugging that gap.

If there is any sense in the approach sketched in this section, we should pay careful attention to the narrative space inhabited by sixteenth-century demoniacs. Stuart Clark has convincingly argued that eschatology, and more specifically various eschatological theories of history inspired by the Book of Revelation, provided the ‘conceptual umbrella’ for possession in much of sixteenth-century Europe. It was widely believed that the end of the world was imminent, and that a ferocious increase in demonic activity would signal the beginning of the ‘last days’.¹⁶ Naturally the point is not that everyone (or even the majority) believed this—simply that eschatological talk was very much ‘in the air’. To quote Clark, ‘the experience of demoniacs was seen as a kind of allegory for the condition of human society as it moved into its final phase’.¹⁷ The rituals of exorcism made heavy use of certain passages from Revelation, particularly Revelation 20 on Satan’s final fate. And it is strikingly apparent that the basic story of any successfully exorcised possession was a complete eschatological history in microcosm: Satan unleashed, Satan raging, and Satan vanquished.

Clark’s general methodological point—that to understand possession one must examine the host culture—is quite beyond dispute. But Clark seems to view this approach as being intrinsically opposed to the psychoanalytic one, which he criticises for trying ‘to impose the categories of modern psychiatry’ on a remote but complex culture that is better understood on its own terms.¹⁸ (Eric Midelfort takes a similar line.¹⁹) We come back to the different levels of psychoanalytic engagement. First-order psychoanalysis is strictly impossible without Clark’s kind of cultural archaeology: if we want to construct chains of unconscious symbolic association then we’d better have some symbols to play with, and they’d better be drawn from the actors’ culture. Against full-blown psychoanalysis Clark has a point. The use of sophisticated psychoanalytic categories may be anachronistic because it tacitly assumes that structures of symbolic association common today were also common in the past. I have already discussed this issue. The view I want to urge now is that the evolution of a possession can be understood as a dynamic process of narrative coupling, whose termination (by exorcism) bears some similarity to the psychoanalytic encounter.

Possession rarely developed in isolation, but rather at the very centre of a terrified family’s attention. The possession self-narrative had enormous power to drag others into its symbolic world—the (many) cases of multiple possession being but the most extreme examples.²⁰ Conversely, that symbolic world was shaped by the contributions of others—hence the uniform symptomology. Possession stereotypes certainly became ‘something which people knew about’,²¹ but it is hard to imagine that all the afflicted *children* were experts at the start of their sufferings. The possession narrative had to be absorbed, and the perfected demonic persona was a collaborative

¹⁶ Clark (1997), Chs. 27–28; on ‘the demonisation of the world’, see Midelfort (1999), pp. 51–55.

¹⁷ Clark (1997), p. 393.

¹⁸ Clark (1997), p. 391.

¹⁹ See n. 10.

²⁰ Sharpe (1996), Ch. 8, gives several examples.

²¹ Clark (1997), p. 192.

construction. There are hints of the analysis chamber here, but we must avoid suggesting that possession was itself a kind of therapy. Untreated demoniacs might suffer appalling torments for years, or even commit suicide.²² (One can, of course, still point to the unconscious appeal of a diagnosis that relieved its recipients of moral responsibility.) Exorcism, though, *was* a therapy. It was often a very effective one: although echoes of the psychoanalytic notion of ‘resistance’ might be detected in the confrontational theatrics of exorcism, the fact is that analyses take years and exorcisms (often) took hours.²³ Why was exorcism so easy? If we import my interpretation of psychoanalytic healing, we have an answer: the demoniac’s conscious self-narrative was eschatological, and so possession contained the seeds of its own destruction. Exorcist and demoniac agreed on the narrative context and their respective roles—all the exorcist had to do was ram the plot of Revelation home. By thus manipulating the *pre-existing* ‘clinical interface’, the exorcist sent the devil into the lake of fire (Revelation 20) and the ‘patient’ into the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21), decisively closing the narrative and ending the illness. The psychoanalyst, by contrast, typically has a lot more narrative-construction work to do, and nothing as convenient as eschatology is available in our culture.²⁴

5.

What has attracted historians to psychoanalysis has, traditionally, been its claims to universality. Those who like psychoanalytic history have defended it on that basis; those who do not have usually rejected it on grounds of cultural specificity. One thing both sides seem to be agreed on is that psychohistorians have to be psychoanalytic entity-realists.²⁵ I have urged a sort of entity-antirealism, and I have done so because I think it makes psychoanalysis *more* useful for historians. If the healing power of psychoanalytic therapy is seen as being dependent on its categories carving the human mind at its (universal) joints, then psychoanalysis becomes a modern scientific triumph without historical antecedents or analogues. If, on the other hand, we can account for its effectiveness in an entity-neutral way—my suggestion is the ‘healing narratives’ view outlined above—then our understanding of psychoanalysis provides a flexible explanatory template within which radically alien past social practices may start to become comprehensible.

Most psychoanalytic history writing falls more naturally under the ‘lens’ metaphor, but the ‘template’ approach is by no means unprecedented. Lyndal Roper’s famous

²² Midelfort (1999), p. 77.

²³ Exorcism rituals in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century England, France and Germany are discussed in Clark (1997), Chs. 27–28.

²⁴ It is worth noting here that there may be more to the relationship between exorcism and psychoanalytic therapy than an explanatorily useful analogy: there may be a causal link. Exorcism, according to Henri Ellenberger, ‘is one of the roots from which, historically speaking, modern dynamic psychotherapy has evolved’ (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 13).

²⁵ The debate is discussed in Gay (1985), especially pp. 3–115.

paper ‘Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany’ is primarily a Kleinian interpretation of witchcraft accusations made by post-partum mothers, but contains the following fascinating remark about witchcraft confessions extracted under torture:

[T]he pressures of interrogation and pain caused accused witches to shape their accounts of their own emotions . . . But narratives in which people try to make sense of their psychic conflicts usually involve borrowing from a language which is not at first the individual’s own. We might say that coming to understand oneself can involve learning to recognise one’s feelings in the terms of a theory, psychoanalytic or diabolic, which one might not originally have applied to oneself, and it can also entail a kind of violence.²⁶

Psychoanalytic and diabolic theories make use of utterly different entity sets. Yet the way they function within certain sorts of coercive social interactions (torture, analysis) can be strikingly similar. Roper’s understanding of psychoanalysis is doing a very different sort of explanatory work in that excerpt than in the main argument of her paper. It is a style of explanation that is powerful precisely because it treats psychoanalytic and diabolic entities symmetrically.²⁷

6.

Psychoanalysis *is* useful as a lens, because the unconscious, like thought, is surely universal. But its symbolic language, like styles of thinking, need not be. In lens mode, then, psychoanalysis must shake out its toolbox of entities and allow the cultural historian to refill it. But that does not make the original toolkit useless: it is a powerful way of understanding a modern social practice—psychoanalytic therapy—which may show surprising *structural* homologies with remote historical phenomena. In those cases, a thorough understanding of the present may be the best route to a partial understanding of the past.

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²⁶ Roper (1994), p. 206.

²⁷ Methodologically similar moves are made in Roper (1994), pp. 226–248, and Levi-Strauss (1958).

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