

Possession: Demoniacal and Other, Among Primitive Races, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modern Times, by Traugott Konstantin Osterreich, translated, London, Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner 1930. (Reprinted by Routledge in 1999).

T.K. Osterreich (1880-1949), a historian of philosophy, religion and psychology, taught at Tübingen University. His compendious volume was published in German in 1921 and deals with possession states rather than possession beliefs or altered states of consciousness (ie. with Bourguignon's [1975] category of PT rather than her P or T).

He starts with instances from the New Testament and from Christianity, in which the possessing demon or other entity speaks in the first person through a human subject who has no subsequent memory of the episode. Is the self then split? Osterreich, who had previously written on the self in Kant, says no, the solution being that there is only one self, functional and affective, but one which may appear in different states. When possessed the self considers itself as other. (Compare Kapferer's 1979 use of G.H. Mead's early symbolic interactionism.) There follows much on how we can reconcile this experiential duality (an accentuation of our habitual conversations within our head) with Kant's unitary self; contrasting this with what he calls the "Franco-English synthetic conception of the ego" as an amalgam of different psychic processes (pages 57, 123). There is detailed discussion of the intruding spirit and its relations with the self, instanced by the Catholic distinction between an essentially external troubling spirit *obsession* and the full, apparent replacement of the self in *possession*. He is clearly familiar with the French literature of Janet, Flournoy and Charcot but does not refer to such classic North American accounts as Prince's *The Dissociation of a Personality* nor indeed to psychoanalysis. Beyond a quite detailed argument about definitions, a remarkable

phenomenological account shows how the personal doubts and blasphemous thoughts of Jeanne des Anges (of the Loudon possessions) condense into her full possession state. Conversations within the head indeed.

In the case of modern multiple personality, first we have this subjective impression of a division of our mind, and then the subject's immediate circle interpret this as a first and second personality (which we take up). In the more traditional non-Western cases, this circle (= culture) is primary in the "infection" of those already possessed, together with the existing local notion that all diseases are anyway caused by the intrusion of an alien spirit. He notes the difference between possession states and the interpretation of possession (Bourguignon's PT and P) which latter "to explain maladies.... adopt[s] the vulgar notion of possession" (page 121). The value of Osterreich today perhaps lives in his detailed account of partial possession, ones awareness of it, and ones variable resistance to it. "Conversations in the head" and multiple personality provide us with a way into looking at the fuller cases of classical possession states.

In the second part of the book, he stands aside from the standpoint of a prior religious psychology "which appears simply to be conventional culture, to suggest that in the modern period, with the development of Western civilisation and education, the devils have become replaced by the spirits of the dead which possess one in spiritualism". Medieval exorcism is replaced by Luther's simple prayers by the side of the possessed person, whilst the epidemics of possession among medieval nuns, such as those at Loudon, have turned to more secular epidemics of mass hysteria involving partial possession or obsession (or physical symptoms only - such as our fairly recent Royal Free Epidemic?). Yet Osterreich curiously maintains clinical hysteria is a distinct and quite irrelevant pattern. He is sardonic on the cultural deterioration of demonic possession which may lead, as with the case of *zar* in Arabia to a "pastime" for women who merely want a new dress (p.231). He supports the nineteenth century notion of psychological suggestion and thus the possibility of thanatomania (death by

suggestion: Mauss 1979). “True possession” involves a temporary change in personality, but he appears as opposed to using acting for the model as he is for that of hysteria. Instead he follows Fraser in arguing that drama is the subsequent social imitation of possession, but also agrees with Seligman in maintaining a continuum between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ possession (thus leaving his neglect of acting a little obscure).

A section on the altered states of shamans concludes that shamanic trance (Bourguignon’s T) as such is not possession. Turning to the Europe of antiquity, he concludes that the Delphian Pythoness was usually possessed, that the authors of the Sibylline Oracles were not possessed, that the Dionisian Bacchantes probably were, as were the Corybantes of the Phrygian cults. Contemporary South Asian and East Asian possession is described, including interesting cases of recent converts to Christianity who suddenly become possessed again by their old deities.

Osterreich criticises anthropologists for their neglect of psychology, and himself is more interested in mechanism than meaning. The book ends, not surprisingly given a few earlier hints, in rejecting the existence of evil spirits, but nevertheless in speculating about the possibility of some, as yet unknown, parapsychological faculties. It is not clear why he does this since his previous argument on internal conversations with subsequent social action comes close to making possession states quite intelligible; but he remains convinced by these modern cases which seem to demonstrate enhanced abilities of the possessed one in the areas of apparently unknown knowledge and languages.

If we are likely now to have moved away from his unitary Kantian self, Osterreich still represents a useful source book, particularly on nineteenth century German authors who may be unknown to an anglophone audience. We may be less worried about defining “true” possession these days and more likely to lump together possession, dissociation, multipersonality disorders, hysteria, method acting and epidemic somatisation as a single general area of interest, with detailed historiographic and

ethnographic account to particularise them. But his accounts of 'partial' possession, the phenomenological slides in and out of 'full' possession, are still of value.

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