

Book Review

Possession: Jung's Comparative Anatomy of the Psyche
by Craig E. Stephenson, Routledge, 2009, ISBN 9780415446525

Reviewed by Susan Rowland, Ph.D.

University of Greenwich

“Craig Stephenson’s *Possession* is a book I trust,” says renowned analyst, Marion Woodman on the back cover, and I know what she means. *Possession* makes a bold claim and defends it with stout heart and convincing argument: that the “possession” of the psyche by something alien and Other is the defining trope of Jungian psychology. Even more ambitious than the notion of “the Other” are the implications of the book’s title and structure. “Possession,” a word that seems to defy psychological containment and immediately drag in exorcists, Gothic literature, and horror films, is a very deliberate choice here.

For on the one hand, the book is a superb addition to the growing body of work on the cultural dimension of psychology as a discipline, a discipline that Craig Stephenson shows needs to become aware of how different cultures and societies “frame” the Other within. On the other hand, this book is also important for a scrupulous and historically anchored examination of Jung’s attitude toward language. Why does Jung use the highly charged term “possession” when he could stick to the cleanly psychological and conceptual language of “feeling toned complexes”? This book explains why.

So *Possession* is part of that vital revolution in the academy, the revision of disciplinary boundaries. In particular, the anthropology of the last century, the book shows, has issued crucial challenges to psychology as to other disciplines. In particular, non-Western societies tend to speak of spirits and gods as *possessing*, whereas Western medicine insists upon a language of pathology. Jung, of course, was well aware of this cultural variance, just as he was conscious of historical change in the perception of the psyche’s inner voices. He began his career with a doctorate on spiritualism and continues to write about the proximity of religious and psychological discourse in the “gods” of the psyche.

Stephenson’s work is dedicated to exploring just *why* Jung could not stick to psychology, to his own century, and to writing about therapy. His book is powerfully *trustworthy* in that it answers questions about Jung’s *Collected Works* that many readers have, yet do not know that they have. What is the significance of

the recurrent anxiety about what psychology is and about disciplinary boundaries? Why is Jung so poetical and equivocal?

The answer to these questions, Stephenson shows, lies in Jung's fidelity to the nature of the psyche and in his perception of its relationship with language. *Possession* begins not with Jung but with an historical study of a famous case of possession and exorcism of Ursuline nuns at Loudon in seventeenth-century France. It is followed by a chapter on anthropology, then by a history of the notion of possession in psychiatry. At last we arrive at Jung with a study of his use of equivocal language. Then, after a chapter on Jung's possession and his therapy, the book concludes with an unusual case study, the "possession" presented fictionally in the film *Opening Night* by John Cassavetes.

By the judicious examination of anthropological evidence and historical sources, Stephenson demonstrates the epistemological issues for psychology and possession. Psychology might claim to be a true discourse of the psyche and might say to a seventeenth-century priest and a tribal shaman that they are both falsely talking of "spirits" when the issue is really a mental illness, but such a claim is impossible to substantiate in any other way except cultural imperialism. Since there is no grand narrative within which we are comfortably placing *all* worldviews or frameworks of meaning, then there is no "objective" point from which to judge whether a possession is properly a religious or a medical situation.

The other aspect to the dangers of "psychologizing," in addition to its implicit colonialism, is that so-called "diagnosis" of possession is more properly a mistake since it applies words to a situation that are uniquely unsuited to doing any good. A subtle strength of this book is its gentleness towards the victims: this book is cognizant of suffering. Telling someone in agony that they are being afflicted by a complex is not much use. Speaking of demons who torture the human soul may be more helpful because even if both parties in twenty-first century analysis understand "demon" as a metaphor, the poetic quality of the language is *engaging*. It speaks compassion and may well open up a channel of energy between therapist and patient.

That is not to say that *Possession* advocates esoteric or occult discourse in the clinic. It certainly does not. It does explore why Jung mixes such language into his writing, in particular by reference to the beliefs about science and rhetoric of Giambattista Vico, an eighteenth-century philosopher who criticized the Enlightenment. Vico was a precursor to Jung in treating the imagination as a crucial source of knowledge. He defined three types of language: the poetic, the heroic, and the vernacular. Mythopoeic and metaphoric, poetic language is charged with numinosity and associated with fusion.

Here language has a divinatory power in the psyche. It recalls, as Stephenson argues, those shaman healers who tell us that knowing the name of the possessing spirit gives some negotiating power over him. What the previous chapters on

3 Rowland

anthropology and history have already shown is the necessity for interaction with the usurping Other. A seventeenth-century nun benefits from having a mystical language with which to figure her penetration by an erotic presence. A Somali woman undergoes a traditional “marriage” rite with her demon. A patient in Jungian analysis is encouraged to embark upon active imagination with a dream figure. The mythical, metaphoric, and poetical language *mobilizes* psychic energies in a way that psychological concepts do not.

Yet, as Stephenson makes abundantly clear, it is not simply a matter of applying poetry and standing well back. The imagination is absolutely necessary to get in touch with the psychic Other, yet so too is the discourse of differentiation. We need to make contact with the Other within as a way of achieving a working relationship, not a surrender. Jung mixes concepts and religious symbols because he believes both types of language are necessary if selfhood is to be secured. Jung’s language is *equivocal*, firstly because the oscillation between concepts and mythological images is essential. Concepts are clear, rational, and empty of Otherness. Symbols etc. are dangerously *full*.

Secondly, Jung’s language is equivocal because his metaphors are and are not designations of the psyche. Metaphors do and do not fuse psychic energies. When Jung speaks of demon possession, he does and does not mean *demon* possession. The metaphor is necessary to convey the extent of the defeat of self and the suffering involved. Jung is also saying that what he calls a complex and a person of another culture may call demon possession may be one and the same thing, and who is to say which words are more true? Moreover, Jung is also using a word like “demon” as *maybe* metaphorical and *maybe* literal to include that gap, that point where language fails to represent. He does so in order to invoke what cannot be represented, the Otherness of the in part unknowable unconscious.

Jung’s language is equivocal, and *Possession* explains why it is all the better for it. This is an important book for the future of analytical psychology. It is also an invaluable resource for all those other disciplines that could gain so much from taking an intelligent look at Jung. Literature, history, anthropology, cultural studies, history of science, look here first.