The Art of Being Oneself: Dissociation in Spiritualist Mediumship

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the relevance of dissociative mental states to our understanding of mediumistic practices. While this avenue of enquiry has recently been pursued by a number of scholars engaged in psychical research, the author approaches the relevance of dissociation by drawing upon his own experiential research as an apprentice and practising medium, together with the insights of analytical psychology.

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Academic and popular discussion of possession and trance phenomena increasingly acknowledges them as encompassing a range of phenomena, and as including practices with potential for productive or beneficial psychological outcomes. Attention is increasingly drawn to the possibility of examining the transformative effect of encounters with non-ordinary realities as one means of gaining scholarly access to those experiences. In this context, the issue of academic access raises two challenges: first, the nature of the phenomena themselves is contested; secondly, this leads to debate as to an appropriate methodology, or even whether one might be possible (Bowie, 2013). Implicit in this debate is uncertainty as to whether such phenomena are real, or if they are, what precisely we might mean by admitting them as real. Why might it be appropriate to accept them as 'non-ordinary' realities, when for many practitioners engaging regularly with possession or trance phenomena, they represent a normal aspect of the ordinary world, and the prospect of a world that does not include them is non-ordinary.

A familiar response to trance and possession phenomena is to explore the possibility that they are psychological in nature; this can be productive provided we remember that trance and possession phenomena may be overlapping categories but are not coincident. In this paper, I suggest that exploration of the psychological state of trance has productive potential because it enables us to comprehend more fully the ways in which possession

phenomena are facilitated, perhaps enabled, by the state of mind indicated by the term trance.

For the purposes of this paper, I draw upon the work of Carl Jung; when asked whether he accepted as real the archetypes and other entities encountered psychically by his patients, he tended to respond that they were psychic facts, and therefore had to be admitted as real for the purposes of analytical psychology in achieving a therapeutic outcome. Such a response can appear disingenuous, but it does at least demonstrate an awareness of scholarly expectations. In discussions as to the nature and effects of possession and trance as enabling or evidencing encounters with spirits, the requirement to demonstrate scholarly credibility becomes especially acute. This paper represents a small preliminary step, no more, in a larger project; namely, the development of a methodology for testing and exploring the nature of spirits engaged with by mediumistic or shamanic practitioners that admits the possibility of their ontological reality. I am emboldened in this endeavour by Fiona Bowie's 2013 article already referenced, in addition to Jack Hunter's encouragement of this approach in his contribution to this issue of *Diskus*.

In *Redefining Shamanisms* (Wilson, 2013), I presented an exploration of Spiritualist mediumship as a shamanic tradition indigenous to modern Anglo-American culture, defining shamanism in terms of an apprenticeship structure discernible across both cultures and time periods. I sought to avoid the pitfalls encountered by previous attempts to comprehend shamanisms with reference to particular phenomena by focusing instead upon the behavioural and psychological development of practitioners as the means of access to those phenomena. In doing this, I made use of historical, sociological and anthropological approaches; as to anthropology, the particular methodology I employed was apprentice-participation in the development circle of Portobello Spiritualist Church in Edinburgh, UK, following in the footsteps of researchers such as Edith Turner (1993) and, more particularly in relation to Spiritualism, Vieda Skultans (1974) and Burke Forrest (1986). One approach I did not adopt in any significant degree was to engage with psychological interpretations of mediumship and possession; it is the particular purpose of this paper to offer some preliminary observations in that respect.

Attending to the transformative effect of encounters with spirits through possession techniques has obvious attractions; partly because it implies the need to attend to processes so as to comprehend more fully the outcomes to which they lead, and partly because exploring transformation leaves open the full range of potential outcomes, from destructive or dangerous to constructive or beneficial, without prejudging. This is tricky research to undertake in the current academic environment; done well, it is both acutely time-consuming and extended in duration, as well as being open-ended as to outcome.

In *Redefining Shamanisms*, and in my ethnographic research supporting that book, I sought to focus on mediumistic training within the Spiritualist movement, partly on the basis that understanding this process of transmission might offer insights into the maintenance of Spiritualism as a social tradition,

and partly because comprehending mediumship as the outcome of a process of conscious training puts to the proof older perceptions of mediumship as some form of divine gift or natural accident, comparable with uncontrolled possession. I seek to encourage a perceptual shift that enables us to explore mediumship as a collaboration involving conscious self-control, at least when undertaken by a proficient practitioner.

Spiritualist insider understandings of mediumship inevitably vary but routinely include the possibility that a spirit might communicate by prompting or stimulating the contents of a medium's personal unconscious. An example might be as follows: a medium giving a public demonstration or private consultation might suddenly have in mind an image of their own grandfather, or might simply find themselves thinking of their grandfather; a self-observant medium might interpret this as an indication that the recipient or client's grandfather is 'with' the medium, and beginning to communicate. The idea or concept of 'grandfather' has been conveyed while working. Mediumistic lore within Spiritualism includes the understanding that the contents of a medium's personal unconscious can exhibit the characteristics not only of unexpectedness but also autonomy and purpose, but that when this happens the experience is appropriately assimilated by being interpreted as indicating spirit communication because it is known, or at least intuited, that the personal unconscious will not exhibit those characteristics in the absence of spirit involvement. This is not only a sophisticated but also a highly collaborative model of mediumship.

The shift to collaborative interpretations of western mediumship is an important counter to the negative connotations of possession that have tended to characterise western traditions, often leading to the depiction of mediumship as inherently pathological, dangerous, or at the very least, highly problematic (Sluhovsky, 2007). The perception of mediumship as symptomatic of psychological disorder has a long history in western medical tradition, and remains current (Wilson, 2013, pp. 63-7); ironically, it represents the direct continuation of a preceding religious perception, albeit it with different dialogical packaging, namely the clothing of medical science. Alex Owen provides a valuable and accessible examination of western medical accounts of mediumship, wherein it has typically been compared to epileptic fits, or other illnesses where the patient loses consciousness or self-control (1989, p. 145). Such accounts rely upon stereotypical representations of mediumship as dramatic, highly performative, unconscious, and often following upon some form of enacted struggle.

Such attitudes persist, often having become more sophisticated, as our understanding of human psychology itself has developed; for example, comparisons with epilepsy might be discarded in favour of suggestions of psychological dissociation, whereby the spirits are interpreted as unintegrated, repressed aspects of the medium's psyche. Such accounts can continue implicitly to embody the negativity of earlier western Christian and medical accounts of mediumship as dangerous or pathological; one reason they persist is simply that they are less vulnerable to challenge from those unversed in analytical psychology.

Against such perceptions, a small number of scholars have come to view mediumistic training and practices in a more positive light, arguing that mediumistic training involves learning techniques that enable forms of psychological healing or personal growth (Huskinson, 2010). There are echoes here with some contemporary shamanic healing practices, particularly that of soul-retrieval, where the shaman works with her or his client to recover lost parts of the client's soul, so as to (re)integrate these successfully (Burgess, 2008, p. 106). The shaman's expertise is based in part in having undertaken this process for her or himself as part of the process of shamanic training, shamanic traditions generally having some form of extended apprenticeship involving various processes of personal development leading to enhanced awareness.

Any shift in western scholarship from assuming that mediumship evidences some form of illness, as being a bad thing in need of a cure, to perceiving mediumistic training as a potentially useful healing modality, is a welcome counterbalance to reductionist approaches to western mediumship, and shamanism more generally. Comparisons with shamanic traditions may well assist this line of development, and arguably have already begun to do so. One can more readily find examples of respectful or qualitatively open accounts where it is possible to 'other' those who maintain such experiences as part of the perceptual world they trust in as real; it is convenient, less challenging, if such testimonials are offered by those who belong to radically different, or simply distant, cultures. As those other cultures become familiar, they are gradually integrated, becoming less other and more us. Where it is demonstrated that useful comparisons may be drawn with traditions to be found within one's own culture, the door is opened to 'bringing home' less value laden assessments of those traditions.

Yet, less adversely judgmental scholarly perceptions of the psychological processes involved in mediumistic training will tend to remain at odds with practitioners' own accounts of the usefulness of that training in at least one respect: the insider perspective is that mediumistic training involves developing the ability to perceive and establish relationships with real, distinct others, and not with aspects of the medium's own personality. In summary, such a perspective recognises that traditions with practice-embodied teachings that involve learning to communicate with distinct others, who are discarnate and must therefore be perceived mentally, requires practitioners to recognise and integrate aspects of their own psyche that they have previously dissociated themselves from, not simply because this is seen as a useful ultimate objective but so as not to mistake those aspects for other persons. A medium unable to discriminate between spirits and aspects of his own psyche is unable to be a reliable medium of communication.

In *Redefining Shamanisms*, I made a general comment to the effect that mediumistic development involves personal healing, and that personal psychological obstacles are also perceived as obstacles to spirit (Wilson, 2013, p. 103). Mediums might readily accept that mediumistic training involves healing aspects, including that of coming to terms with problematic aspects of

one's own personality, even as they also point out that the ability to be more fully oneself is utilised in Spiritualist demonstrations so as to communicate with, or (in some forms of trance mediumship) embody or be, people who are distinctly and definitively other, for the benefit of one or more third parties. Integration of one's psyche, by correcting unconscious dissociation, and learning consciously to dissociate through meditation, while recognised as stages in mediumistic training, are not the ultimate aim of that training; instead, they enable completion of a preliminary stage whereby an apprentice learns to distinguish between self and other, something that cannot be done reliably so long as the self remains partially unknown and therefore at risk of, among other things, being mistakenly perceived as other. A medium who has not fully integrated him or herself cannot be sure as to when he or she is encountering oneself or another, a point that may go some considerable way, on both insider and outsider perspectives, to explaining the unreliability of much observed mediumship.

Insider understandings of mediumship raise important points in relation to psychological analyses of the processes involved in mediumship. If we try to account for mediumistic training using only a healing/integrating model, we risk overlooking the fact that apprentice mediums are generally taught that the majority, possibly the overwhelming majority, of the entities they perceive are other people, and not simply aspects of their own personality; on the insider view, it therefore follows that the appropriate relationship to develop with that entity (spirit) is a conversational one between equals (the purpose of mediumship being communication) and that any attempt to relate to that person in any other way, let alone to attempt to integrate them, would be misguided, futile, and tend to undermine the mental health of the practitioner, rather than to enhance it. Such an insider perspective accepts the integrative process as both necessary and healing so far as it deals with aspects of the self but as inappropriate when encountering those who are other, not-self, because (i) they truly are other people, and (ii) in order to be recognised as a competent medium, it is necessary to learn modes of communication with them as distinct others; to fail to do this is to undermine the healing that has been achieved instead of putting it to good use.

A corresponding outsider perspective might see the integrative healing process as incomplete, in that entities improperly regarded as others are aspects of the self that remain unintegrated or, given that some form of relationship has been established with them, have been integrated inappropriately, or only partially.

For the purposes of the working medium, the training process as personally healing by facilitating integration of the self is sufficiently complete when able reliably to discern spirits, even as other aspects of personal and mediumistic training may remain incomplete; by contrast, an outsider might see the process as being deliberately halted at a certain point so as to achieve another socially relevant objective that comes to take priority, namely that of functioning appropriately as a working medium in a Spiritualist setting. If the measure of psychological health is social functioning, one might maintain that an appropriate degree of self-integration has been achieved on both insider

and outsider perspectives, but there remains an obvious difference in understanding as to exactly what has been achieved, particularly as to whether or not the process of self-integration could be taken further. Nevertheless, there is a commonality to these perspectives, an area of overlap, in that the process of self-integration is at least partially correct on both insider and outsider perspectives; as regards a practice as contentious as mediumship, this surely represents useful progress.

In order to map this area of overlap more precisely, I use the remainder of this paper to engage more directly with the potential contribution of analytical psychology to understandings of mediumship; in doing so, I draw upon Lucy Huskinson's valuable contribution, 'Analytical Psychology and Spirit Possession: Towards a Non-Pathological Diagnosis of Spirit Possession' (2010). It is also interesting to note that a number of scholars concerned with what has traditionally been termed 'psychical research' have recently been exploring the relevance of dissociation to a more developed understanding of mediumship (Maraldi, 2014; Irwin et al, 2014).

It is useful to set out a brief discussion of what is meant by dissociation, itself a normal part of healthy psychological functioning. Dissociation is essentially a matter of focus; as I concentrate on writing this paper, I dissociate myself from distractions, or at least I try to do so sufficiently to complete the task. If my mind were stronger, in the sense of being more disciplined, I might honestly say that I enter a form of trance, a mental state where I become unaware even of irrelevant thoughts; the reality, of course, is that this is true only in sufficient degree as to enable me to be intermittently productive. The untidy reality may be a good thing; if I become entirely unaware of my physical environment, I may expose myself to risk, if only the risk of failing to notice things I need to attend to. If I become unable to depart from my trance, my focus, by reassociating with, or reintegrating, the various aspects of a socially engaged life, it would be psychologically disastrous, and correctly diagnosed as a disorder.

Dissociation is an important human ability but it is also the mark of a healthy, disciplined psyche that one does not remain stuck there; it is the mark of a disciplined psyche that one is able to control when, where, and for how long one does it. It is important to control the degree to which one dissociates; there is probably no great harm while driving to the supermarket in dissociating sufficiently to give thought to the purchases one intends to make, yet equally probably disastrous to focus entirely upon those intended purchases, thereby dissociating from the activity of driving. There are degrees of dissociation, hence there are degrees of trance.

As can be seen from this example, unexpected or uncontrolled events can happen when using dissociative techniques; arguably, the greater the degree of dissociation, the more scope there is for the unexpected, unwanted or unintended, whether this be collisions with other vehicles or instances of possession, the collision of psyches. An important point here is that the dissociative or trance state need not lead to such outcomes; it merely creates the opportunity or psychic space for them to occur. It is entirely possible to

dissociate while driving without having a car crash, to enter a state of trance without being possessed. For those outcomes to occur, some additional element must be present in the environment, or some additional agency.

The ability to dissociate implies different aspects to an individual psyche, sometimes referred to as 'streams of consciousness' or, as Huskinson refers to them, different 'ego-states' (2010, p. 72). A healthy personality is one that recognizes and maintains a psychological dialogue between its various aspects, does not allow any one aspect to dominate and, conversely, does not allow one or more aspects to become overlooked, forgotten, permanently dissociated, such that they fall from consciousness, and the conscious mind becomes unaware even of the possibility of retrieval. When this happens, the human capacity to dissociate has become a dissociative disorder, in that the psyche has become incomplete. Huskinson alerts us to the important point that it is not possession phenomena that lend themselves to possible diagnosis of pathology, but is instead the state of functioning of the conscious self, the disposition of the ego (2010, p. 73).

A Spiritualist medium might well acknowledge that it is indeed possible to encounter a pathological spirit yet is likely still to maintain that it would be an error to diagnose the act of communicating as inherently pathological. I am not good or bad, sane or mad, according to whom I converse with, though I might be unwise or overly trusting. Spiritualist practice seeks to discriminate between welcome and unwelcome mediumistic phenomena, principally according to whether they have been sought, are being managed appropriately, or can be comprehended; if they are, the phenomena are more likely to be admitted and recognized as 'evidence of spirit', on much the same basis as an analytical psychologist might reach a diagnosis of healthy psychological functioning. By contrast, if the phenomena are unexpected, uncontrolled or unintelligible, they are more likely to be treated with suspicion, as undesirable and unwelcome, much as the psychologist might interpret the behaviour as pathological. For both the witnessing Spiritualist community and the psychologist, the test of whether the effect of the phenomena is beneficial or productive is answered with reference to their respective communal expectations.

Although Huskinson reflects the discussions of both Freud and Jung by considering dissociation in relation to possession phenomena, Spiritualist mediums and other shamanic practitioners concern themselves with the full range of mediumistic techniques and the phenomena they enable, all of which are recognized as involving proficiency in dissociative technique or, in Spiritualist parlance, appropriate mediumistic 'focus'. Dissociative technique is relevant to a wider range of phenomena than those often grouped together under the heading of possession, the more obviously so in that it functions as the means of communication between the conscious and unconscious parts of one's psyche, and not all mediums work by employing possession techniques. Freud and Jung developed differing understandings of the nature of the unconscious, which led to their respective interpretations of possession phenomena and, by extension, their divergent attitudes to mediumistic phenomena. For both Freud and Jung, the measure of psychological health is

social functioning, the ability to maintain balanced, enjoyable dialogues with others and within oneself, between the different aspects of one's psyche, including as between its conscious and unconscious aspects. It is by cultivating and husbanding such dialogical networks that we develop psychologically. We grow as human beings by learning to create opportunities for both affirmation and challenge, the assimilation of new experiences. Here we have one of the key attractions of mediumship; whatever else it might offer, its use of dissociative techniques in mediumistic training offers highly relevant ways of exploring one's psyche. During my time as a participant in the development circle of Portobello Spiritualist Church, it was clear that some members join in the hope of achieving a degree of personal development, rather than because they hoped to become mediums; having identified the relevance of dissociative technique, this appears as an intelligible and appropriate expectation.

'By contrast, a mentally unstable personality is one that splits off aspects of the mind and isolates these parts from each other, thereby preventing their creative dialogue and disabling the development of the personality as a whole' (Huskinson, 2010, p. 76). That which is an obstacle to one's personal development is necessarily also an obstacle to mediumistic development. At Portobello Spiritualist Church, mental illness was effectively a bar to admission to the development circle, the church's teaching forum. Spiritualists, including those who teach mediumship, might not use the terminology I employ here, but my experience is that when encountering a mentally unstable personality, they will clearly intuit a fundamental difficulty that lies beyond the capacity of the healing aspects of mediumistic training to correct. Mediumistic training builds upon the normal human capacity to dissociate; if that capacity is lacking, or is in some way disordered, the training cannot begin, and if attempted may prove injurious.

At Portobello Spiritualist Church, I found that many Spiritualists evidence interest in the nature of the unconscious, and I have often heard claims to the effect that (those in) spirit on occasion use the unconscious as a means of communication, for example, by stimulating a medium's unconscious so as to bring to conscious awareness thoughts, memories or images that can be interpreted as meaningful communication, as in the grandfather example given above. Indeed, I have even heard the claim that Jung's collective unconscious is simply an alternative term for spirit, which I took as an insider claim that Jung engaged with spirit phenomena and correctly identified a psychological aspect to that engagement but erred in comprehending them in purely psychological terms.

Mediumistic practice can also involve grasping communications conveyed in highly symbolic forms, making use of universal or at least communal symbols, or other content that, while intelligible, are not recognised by the medium as having their origin in the medium's personal history. In this way, Spiritualists, especially Spiritualist mediums, readily distinguish between aspects of their personal psyche and other phenomena that are both purposeful and intelligent, and have their source beyond the medium; such phenomena are therefore understood in Spiritualist parlance as 'coming from spirit'. This

perception is paralleled by Jung's distinction between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. For both Freud and Jung, the personal unconscious comprises those aspects of the self that do not lie at the forefront of one's awareness, whether those aspects are repressed, forgotten or simply not of interest for the moment. For Freud, the contents of the unconscious can startle us but only because they have been forgotten or repressed; although unexpected, in the moment, they are not new, and are reintegrated by being remembered, accepted again.

For Jung, the unconscious can show autonomy and independent purpose, even self-awareness and a sense of identity that do not derive from the individual psyche; further, similarities in such experiences as between patients led him to postulate a collective unconscious, which we participate in, communicate with, or otherwise draw upon individually. As Huskinson puts it, 'the communications of the autonomous unconscious have never been known by the ego and remain resolutely unknowable. In this respect, the ego is the recipient of *new* material from a source outside it' (2010, p. 76). In saying that this autonomous collective unconscious remains unknowable, it is however important to keep in mind that Jung meant this in a particular sense; namely, that the collective unconscious is infinite. The collective unconscious is not entirely or inherently unknowable, else meaningful communication with it would not be possible, but it is knowable only to the extent that the individual psyche is able meaningfully to comprehend it; however extensive communication with it might be, the collective unconscious is inexhaustible, hence always retains the capacity to say something new. A healthy psyche able to make productive use of dissociation so as to allow the collective unconscious to speak more clearly renders accessible an infinite range of experiential possibilities.

Does the boundary between Jung's collective unconscious and the personal unconscious map exactly that between Spirit and the personal unconscious perceived in Spiritualist mediumistic practice? I do not know the answer, but this is a worthwhile question, if only for its potential to reveal aspects of Spiritualist understanding that might otherwise go unarticulated.
Within the scope of this short note it is possible only to sketch out this suggestion, and to indicate it as an example of the new avenues of enquiry that become possible if we depart from default interpretations of mediumship as pathological *per se*, and admit as possible the Spiritualist claim that useful mediumship is obstructed by a pathological psyche, rather than being an indicator of it. Although mediumistic biographies offer plentiful examples of processes of psychological struggle in the context of apprenticeship, these tend to characterise the early stages of development and are balanced by corresponding examples of productive psychological outcomes, echoing the potentiality of possession states identified by Jung, and highlighted by Huskinson.

The art of being fully oneself involves recognising the self as dynamic, so as to acquire skill in discriminating reliably between self and other, whoever or whatever that other might be; for this reason, the disciplines of mediumship and analytical psychology have much to offer each other. Analytical

psychology offers additional tools with which to explore and comprehend mediumistic training and the nature of the phenomena encountered in mediumistic practice, perhaps even the possibility of exploring more fully the ontological reality and nature of the phenomena Jung indicated by the term collective unconscious.

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