

6. *The Inarticulate Body:* *Demonic Conflicts in The Exorcist*

Several years ago I set out to write a novel that would not only excite and entertain (sermons that put one to sleep are useless), but would also make a positive statement about God, the human condition, and the relationship between the two.

– W.P. Blatty¹

INTRODUCING THE EVIL

The Exorcist (1971; “E”) by William Peter Blatty, one of horror’s all time greatest bestsellers, starts off with three quotations and three names. The first quotation is from the Bible, from the famous possession narrative in the gospel of Luke (8:27-30). The second is an excerpt from a FBI recording of two Mafia killers laughing and discussing how they had hung their victim on a meat hook and tortured him with electric shocks for three days before the victim died. The third quotation is an account of the communist atrocities towards Christians during the Vietnam war: a priest having eight nails driven into his skull, a praying teacher and his pupils executed in equally cruel and suggestive ways.² The three names which follow are Dachau, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald.

The Exorcist can be read as a relentless exploration of evil, and as an argument advocating religious interpretation of it: evil as a supernatural, malevolent power that is actively operating in our world. The first quotation establishes the general framing of the novel as Christian; the evil is situated and discussed in the Christian tradition, having the demonic possession as its central topos. The second connects the ancient theme of evil as the mythical adversary with contemporary evils: the Mafia and Communism (in the third quotation). The extreme cruelty of criminals and Vietnamese soldiers are paralleled and thereby associated with the inhuman evil power that Jesus was confronting in the possessed man. The violence in these epigraphs is shocking; it is beyond what most people would be able to imagine, even if they have become used to reports of war and crime. They force the reader into an emotional reaction, and legitimise the use of the term “evil” in the

¹ As quoted in Travers - Reiff 1974, 9.

² Dr. Thomas Dooley’s report of his experiences of treating refugees from North Vietnam were published in his book, *Deliver Us from Evil* (1956).

contemporary culture, when we are more likely to expect psychological, social or historical explanations, not references to the religious idea of supernatural evil. In this context, the names of Nazi concentration camps operate as statements, too. They affect the reader by evoking images of systematic extermination of men, women and children by a modern, Western state. The overall effect of this opening to the novel is twofold: it establishes the religious position and brings the dilemma of evil into a contemporary and realistic context. On the other hand, the gesture works also in the other direction: contemporary horrors are also made mythical and alien. The criminals and Communists are grouped with Nazis to evoke the mythical figure of the opponent, the demonised Other of Christianity.

The tension between the religious or mythical level and the demand of realism is central to *The Exorcist*. It contributes significantly to the particular, striking effect this book and the subsequent film (1973, directed by William Friedkin) have on the audience. The narrative structure of the novel is seemingly simple, and hides many important complexities that invigorate it at a thematic level. To grasp the attention of the secularised, modern audience with a narrative dealing with the devil and demons, *The Exorcist* employs every available means to make the incredible credible, and to suspend disbelief. The novel is relatively well researched. The basic symptoms of possession, as well as the ritual of exorcism, and the supernatural occurrences during it, are based on documents and accounts of such cases from the history of the Catholic church. Blatty himself presents his role as a documentarian: "I don't think I had anything consciously to do with formulating the plot for *The Exorcist*. The only real work I consciously did was on researching the symptomology of possession and the medical information."³ Also, when producing his book as a movie, Blatty strongly supported William Friedkin as the director because of his solid live television and documentary experience; Blatty wanted *The Exorcist* to have a "look of documentary realism," and Friedkin was able to provide it.⁴ Questions of the mythical and the actual, of faith and disbelief, are inscribed into the tensions that structure *The Exorcist*, and contribute to its numerous demonic conflicts.

THE REAL ENEMY

The pursuit of "authenticity" and the interrelated degree of belief invested in the supernatural phenomena described in the novel and the movie make *The Exorcist* quite a special case in the history of modern horror. It is a religious work of art, but – one might say – a perverted one. It does try to make an apologetic statement about the existence of God but very indirectly; instead of affirming the good, it employs demonology and the Catholic Christian tradition to convince the reader and the film audience of the continuous influence of supernatural evil. The jacket blurb for the original US edition of

³ Travers - Reiff 1974, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

The Exorcist prominently displayed the author's personal background: William Peter Blatty was educated at Jesuit schools and at Georgetown University. The origin of the novel is in those years, as Blatty was given the topic of demonic possession for an oratorical assignment by his professor, Father Thomas Bermingham (a Jesuit).⁵ An article about a contemporary case of possession (a fourteen-year old boy from Mount Rainier, in 1949) especially arrested young Blatty's imagination.⁶ Later, as he began writing *The Exorcist* he interviewed the priest who had performed this exorcism, and studied other cases. Members of the Church informed Blatty, and they were also involved in making the movie; the Reverend Bermingham acted the part of the president of the Georgetown University, the Reverend William O'Malley (S.J.) was enlisted as Father Dyer in the film, and the Reverend John J. Nicola (S.J.), the assistant director of the National Shrine, as the exorcism expert on the set. Father Nicola was at the time the priest who acted on behalf of the Catholic Church in investigating potential cases of diabolical possession and deciding the proper procedure.⁷ The opinions of the Church about *The Exorcist* were divided, but one can accurately characterise it as an important modern Catholic work – even if it is a personal and controversial rather than an official aspect of Catholicism which it expounds.⁸ The last page in the book is titled "About the Author," and it states that W.P. Blatty is the former "Policy Brand Chief of the U.S. Air Force Psychological Warfare Division." Everything underlines Blatty's serious commitment to study de-

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ The documents pertaining to this case have been declared secret by the Catholic Church. However, Farther Nicola (assisting on the filming of *The Exorcist*) had access to this information; Thomas B. Allen, in his *Possessed: The True Story of An Exorcism* (1993), documents the sources he has used in this novelistic reconstruction of the original case (Allen 1994, 251-80).

⁷ Travers - Reiff 1974, 82.

⁸ Peter Travers and Stephanie Reiff report the strong reactions to *The Exorcist* as follows: "Public reaction to the novel ranged from Jane Wyman's taking her priest to task for recommending the novel, to the adoption of the novel as required reading in some Catholic high schools. Lay Catholic publications divided on the question of the book's accuracy. Their dissension was based upon a theological difference of opinion. Blatty's fan mail also ran the gamut – priests wrote to thank him for helping them resolve a problem of faith, many lay Catholics accused him of plunging the Church back into the Middle Ages, and others longed to borrow the instruments of punishment from that same period. But whether the response was positive or negative, one fact emerged – the book remained the topic of many cocktail party 'sermons'" (ibid., 21). – Other reports describe people frequently fainting in screenings, several heart attacks and one miscarriage were reported. According to Stephen Jones, "in Berkeley, California, a man attacked the screen attempting to kill the demon. The number of people seeking psychiatric help increased, church attendance began to rise dramatically, and violence broke out at many screenings." The film was presented in Rome to a Vatican audience, and Blatty has drawn his own conclusions: "The Pope did make a statement shortly after the release of *The Exorcist* reaffirming the Church's position on the existence of Satan as a supreme and intelligent force of evil. I'm sure that had something to do with *The Exorcist*." (Barker - Jones 1997, 41.) Some reassessments of the film (relating to its recent re-release as the "most terrifying film ever") can be found in Kermodé 1998.

monic possession as reality: “Mr. Blatty has read every book in English on the subject. [...] In spite of scientific advances since [1921], the subject remains ultimately speculative.”⁹

As a work of horror, the popularity of *The Exorcist* was unprecedented: the novel sold over twelve million copies in the US alone, and with the movie version the audience for this exorcism grew to over one hundred million.¹⁰ The critical response has concentrated on the film; with its spectacular special effects and avoidance of theological speculations (those figure more prominently in the novel), the movie has evoked strongly negative estimations. Its starting point, the existence and influence of non-human evil, was dismissed as intellectually un-acceptable, and critics refused to discuss the film on its own terms (something that religious communities were eager to do): *The Exorcist* was dismissed as a sensationalist, hollow exploitation of the dark side of the Catholic tradition.¹¹ James Twitchell, in his history of the modern horror film, *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985), situates *The Exorcist* in a wider context of modern horror, and notes how it was one of a whole sub-genre of works presenting children as incarnations of evil – *Rosemary’s Baby* being here the central breakthrough of the subgenre, even if the motif predates it.¹² As mentioned earlier, Stephen King connects the “Exorcist phenomenon” to the conservative fear of the young generation: the profanities

⁹ E, “About the Author.” The serious commitment to the battle with Evil was apparent also during the filming of *The Exorcist*; a catholic priest would read a blessing of protection (against evil) as the opening procedure at every shooting location. The declared reason for this was psychological. “Blatty knew that involving the cast and crew in the machinations of the diabolical held open the possibility of malevolent suggestion.” (Travers - Reiff 1974, 64.) However, the immersion in Catholicism went quite far – director Friedkin, a non-practising Jew, in one case received Holy Communion with the believers (basically an act of sacrilege; *ibid.*, 33). On the other hand, the theological goals were ambiguously related to the aim to make a blockbuster horror movie; Friedkin states that in editing *The Exorcist* “every attempt has been made to underplay the metaphysics and play up the horror” (*ibid.*, 118).

¹⁰ Sutherland 1981, 30.

¹¹ Some critical examples: “No more nor less than a blood and thunder horror movie, foundering heavily on the rocks of pretension” (Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*); “Spectacularly ludicrous mishmash with uncomfortable attention to physical detail and no talent for narrative or verisimilitude. Its sensational aspects, together with a sudden worldwide need for the supernatural, assured its enormous commercial success” (Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell’s Film Guide*). The emphatically negative perception dominates even contemporary cultural and film studies: “[...] not only is *The Exorcist* a pretentious and rather dull horror film, it displays a remarkably crude conservatism which distinguishes it from more general developments in the genre” (Jancovich 1992, 93).

¹² Twitchell gives as his examples *Village of the Damned* and *Children of the Damned* (based on the *The Midwiltch Cuckoos* by John Wyndham), *The Devil Within Her*, *Fear No Evil*, *The Haunting of Julia*, *Possession*, *The Omen (I, II and III)*, *To the Devil ... A Daughter*, *Grave of the Vampire*, *Eraserhead*, *It’s Alive*, *It Lives Again*, *The Brood*, *Inseminoid*, *Scared to Death*, *The Intruder Within*, *The Exorcist*, *The Heretic*, *Audrey Rose*, *The Manitou*, *Demon Witch Child*, *The Stranger Within*, *The Sentinel*, and *Alien*. (Twitchell 1985, 297-301.) Many of these suggest even with their names that the evil child expresses a particularly “internal” mode of horror.

and blasphemies spewed out by the possessed girl, Regan, made her a personification of the disavowal of traditional values by contemporary teenagers.¹³ Also John Sutherland, in his study of bestsellers, thinks that the popularity of *The Exorcist* can be best explained by the breaking up of the taboos concerning children and sexuality. A horror novel or film was a form of adult culture, offering new ways to explore fears and frustrations about children.¹⁴ As a Hollywood screenwriter, William Blatty consciously adopted the film to supply important context and content for *The Exorcist*. Robin Wood has studied how the particular “economy of otherness” is always informed by economical and ideological concerns of the film companies in Hollywood.¹⁵ Apart from film studies, criticism has not been very interested in this work. Such surveys of the horror literature as *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (1979) by Elizabeth MacAndrew or *The Literature of Terror* (1980) by David Punter do not deal with *The Exorcist* at all. Such a recent textbook as Fred Botting’s *Gothic* (1996) does not accept Blatty’s work into its bibliography.

The Exorcist is able to provoke strong reactions, and the critical dismissal is perhaps one symptom of the particular manner in which the demonic is employed. Rosemary Jackson, in her discussion of the subversive potentials of the fantastic, renounces the “moral and religious allegories” of “faery,” or romance literature (in the best-selling fantasies of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin, for example) and claims that they move away from “the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’” into some religious longing or nostalgia. She writes that this popular fantasy thus defuses “potentially disturbing, anti-social drives” and retreats from any “profound confrontation with existential dis-ease.”¹⁶ Because of the (supposedly) “reactionary” political-religious agenda of *The Exorcist* it is perhaps hard to come to terms with the ways its transgressions operate – the Enlightenment project of scientific emancipation from “superstitions” is the complete opposite of the goals of this work. Jackson’s evolution of the demonic from an external power into an aspect of self, “self as other” (see above, chapter four), is reversed in Blatty’s narrative; the mature

¹³ See King 1981/1987, 196-7. In her study of the generation gap, *Culture and Commitment* (1970), Margaret Mead characterises the 1960s as a time of rupture in the area of shared values in the American society; the dominant feeling among the younger generation was that the previous generation could not give any reliable guidelines for moral choices (Barnouw 1963/1973, 454). The question of a generation gap is addressed in the opening pages of *The Exorcist*: the sensibility of Regan’s mother is characterised by her instinctual rejection of the empty “slogans” and stupidity of the student insurrections. “How come? she now wondered. *Generation gap? That’s a crock; I’m thirty-two. It’s just plain dumb, that’s all, it’s ...!*” (E, 13). William G. Doty has written how periods of cultural fragmentation threaten social structures and may produce a conservative reaction, “leading to an almost magical reaffirmation” of the mythical order (Doty 1986, 26). This debate on order and chaos is incorporated as an element in *The Exorcist*.

¹⁴ Sutherland 1981, 59-68.

¹⁵ Wood 1986, especially pp. 70-94.

¹⁶ Jackson 1981, 9.

acceptance of otherness as an element of the self is contrasted with the mature acceptance of the existence of the unacceptable. The religious self structuring the psychic drama of *The Exorcist* is based on the incompatibility of good and evil: it is an ethical and existential imperative for such a selfhood to prohibit good and evil from blending. Any attempt to understand a religious work from inside the scientific tradition should hold this in mind: words like “truth” and “knowledge” are thematised differently, and moral values (the existence of absolute Good, as well as Evil) are not just arguments to be proved or disproved – their existence stands as the most fundamental foundation of the religious mind. The operation of the demon in *The Exorcist* can be approached from this starting point.

ANXIETIES IN THE MALE GOTHIC

“Religious longing” and “potentially disturbing, anti-social drives” both drive *The Exorcist*, and contributing to its tensions. The possession of Regan takes the form of gradually intensifying transgressions and transformations: a pretty eleven-year-old with furry animals and freckles metamorphoses into a foul-mouthed being with sinister powers and malevolent intelligence. Possession is in this process connected with adolescence, problems with school, carelessness with one’s clothes, then to awakening sexuality and “adult” language. The biological foundations of a human being are encountered in the form of the body, bodily functions and transformations of the body, as in growing up, getting old, and falling sick. The disturbing and “anti-social” dimensions of human existence are confronted and they are given a name and a voice – or rather, *voices*, as the demonised otherness is especially threatening in its chaotic plurality. In a manner firmly within the Gothic tradition, *The Exorcist* engages in transgressive and potentially subversive displays, such as the possessed girl masturbating with a crucifix, in order to re-establish normal order and a religious ideology in the end. This feature of the Gothic has been likened to that of pornography: it tends to “buttress a dominant, bourgeois, ideology, by vicarious wish fulfilment through fantasies of incest, rape, murder, parricide, social disorder.”¹⁷ *The Exorcist* is also a clear example of the Male Gothic tradition, as defined by Anne Williams; it has multiple points of view, it insists on the supernatural as a “reality” of its narrative universe, it has a tragic plot and it focuses on the possessed Regan, on her tortured and mutating female body, as an object observed with a horrified, male eye/I. The daimonic, threatening impulses take the form of a female demon in the male psyche, as Joseph Andriano has argued. A male reading of this horror fantasy has to be aware of the underlying pursuit of symbolic and psychic unity, ask whether it is achieved in the text, and – if it is – at what cost.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175. See also Williams 1995, 106.

The most significant opponent of the demon in the ritual of exorcism is the priest; he stands for the Church, and exercises the apostolic authority granted by Christ to cast out unclean spirits in his name.¹⁸ The relationship between Father Karras, the Jesuit and the modern man, and the possessed child brings forward the most acute conflicts empowering the demonic in the novel. The conflicts are framed as universal – *The Exorcist* opens with a section in Iraq, as Father Merrin confronts signs of “that Other who ravaged his dreams,” embodied in a statue of the demon Pazuzu.¹⁹ In another narrative continuum, Regan’s mother, actress Chris MacNeil faces “the ancient enemy” as well in a dream, about death: “she was gasping, dissolving, slipping off into void, thinking over and over, *I am not going to be, I will die, I won’t be, and forever and ever [...]*.”²⁰ The warring mind of Father Karras incorporates these two fears, the demon of “sickness and disease” with the existential fear of meaninglessness of life without the transcendental. He has lost his faith, and the lack of supernatural salvation makes the materiality, the cruelty and the imperfection of the world unbearable.

[Karras:] “[...] *I’m having problems of my own. I mean, doubts.*”
 “*What thinking man doesn’t, Damien?*”

A harried man with many appointments, the Provincial had not pressed him for the reasons for his doubt. For which Karras was grateful. He knew that his answers would have sounded insane: *The need to rend food with the teeth and then defecate. My mother’s nine First Fridays. Stinking socks. Thalidomide babies. An item in the paper about a young altar boy waiting at a bus stop; set on by strangers; sprayed with kerosene; ignited.* No. Too emotional. Vague. Existential. More rooted in the logic was the silence of God. In the world there was evil. And much of the evil resulted from doubt; from an honest confusion among men of good will. Would a reasonable God refuse to end it? Not reveal Himself? Not speak?

“*Lord, give us a sign....*”

The raising of Lazarus was dim in the distant past. No one now living had heard his laughter.

Why not a sign? [...]

The yearning consumed him.²¹

The principal task of religion in Karras’s mind is to transgress the material universe: his Manichaean version of Catholicism perceives the material world as a series of humiliations for a spiritual being. The images that are

¹⁸ See Matt. 10:1; Mk. 6:7; Lk. 9:1. – It should be pointed out, that from the Christian perspective the mere name of Jesus is not enough (actual faith is needed); “The Acts of the Apostles” narrates how some Jewish exorcists tried to use Jesus’ name, but were beaten by the demoniac (Acts 19:13-16). (On the other hand, see also Lk. 9:49-50.)

¹⁹ E, 5, 7. – Previously an obscure ancient god/demon, Pazuzu has become a prominent symbol of the Other, because of this appearance in *The Exorcist*. See, e.g. the appearances in Clive Barker’s play and Christopher Moore’s novel (discussed below, pp. 195 and 287).

²⁰ E, 14.

²¹ E, 48-49. The italics in the original.

torturing him are significantly lacking in human warmth. Julia Kristeva, in her study of abjection, points out the complexities involving the borders of the body in the establishment of subjectivity: the body extricates itself from dead matter, waste, defilement, shit, and the subject perceives itself in this act of exclusion. According to Kristeva, this demarcation of the abject from what will be a subject and its objects is primal. The subject experiences discomfort, unease and dizziness in the face of original ambiguity: there has to be an Other before “me,” “an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be.”²² This ambiguity is closely connected with the status of our human body. Kristeva also points out that abjection is an important power structuring all religious systems, and when Christian sin once integrated and named abjection into its totalising dialectic (of lapse and confession), the contemporary “crisis in Christianity” elicits “more archaic resonances that are culturally prior to sin.”²³ This suggests some important lines of analysis in Father Karras’s case.

THE ABJECT AREAS

The “*need to rend food with the teeth*” is an expression that does not just denote eating: it also alludes to the beastly inheritance of our biology. Thus, it thematises the heterogeneous borderline of human and animal. This sensitive division line becomes apparent later, in the course of Regan’s possession. The expression “*defecate*” implies the abject impurity connected with the orifices of the human body; the openings of the body and the material moving into the body and issuing from the body confound the limit between the self and the other. As Bakhtin noted in his study of Rabelais, the mediaeval diableries engaged the ambivalence of bodily existence with grotesque, demonic forms – the mouth, the belly, the arse were exaggerated and combined with debasing gestures such as the slinging of excrement or drenching in urine. Bakhtin writes that “such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum.”²⁴ Classical and the realistic aesthetics did not allow such expressions of the ambivalent and the monstrous, but in contemporary horror the diablerie returns – even in its grotesque-comical forms as in the outrageously funny violence of Peter Jackson’s films.²⁵ The grotesque manifestations of the

²² Kristeva 1980/1982, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Bakhtin 1965/1984, 148. – Susan Bordo has outlined the history of the body as “alien,” as the “not-self”; it is experienced as “confinement and limitation” (a “prison,” a “swamp,” a “cage,” a “fog” are all used to characterise it in Plato, Augustine, and Descartes). The body is the enemy – “the body is the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*” (Bordo 1993, 144-45 [italics in the original]).

²⁵ The first one was (accurately) named as *Bad Taste* (1988). His third direction, *Braindead* (1992) carries the style (“zombie splatter”) even further.

body and the “lower stratum” also have their ample expression in *The Exorcist*.

The particular interpretation given to the demonic in *The Exorcist* combines the ambivalent and abject dimensions of the liminal in subjectivity to religious thematics. All the wrongs and imperfections of the world are assembled together in Karras’s stream-of-consciousness, until his mother’s poverty, stinking socks and thalidomide babies lead in their random, carnivalesque logic to the expression of extreme evil: the cruel killing of “a young altar boy.” Here, as well as in the last of the initial epigraphs, the religious interpretation of violence is suggested by its object. It is the violence towards an innocent child, and especially a *Christian* child that *The Exorcist* is highlighting. The implied reader should here pick up the cue, complete the suggested connection and come up with the religious answer to the problems of our existence – the spiritual, the Christian, the Good and the God are the implied opposites of the manifest reality (the material, the anti-Christian, the Evil, the devil). This is certainly what the protagonist, Father Karras, seems to be looking for. The actual reader is, of course, free to situate this answer in a wider interpretational context, and to “read against” the ways *The Exorcist* offers itself to be read. For a demonic text, such tensions in reading might even be imperative.

The demonic figures powerfully in the world of *The Exorcist*, and there are but few chances to overcome its dominion. It is the hellish world of the concentration camps’ smoking furnaces that stands in the background of this drama. The continuous, unjustified suffering of the innocent is a central theme; in the sequel, *Legion* (1983), Blatty uses the same motif – a young black (and mute) Christian boy is crucified with extreme cruelty. Detective Kinderman (Kinder-Man, “children’s-man”: name suggesting a sympathetic character) is ready to pursue his search for the source of evil to the highest levels, literally: “*I will find your murderer, Thomas Kintry* [Kinderman thought]. Even if it were God.”²⁶ This will open up another possibility for interpreting the transgressive excesses Regan’s demonic possession will reach; the repressed anger towards God, the Father. Freud applied his theory of the Oedipal complex to the case of “demonological neurosis” to point out, firstly, that God is a father-substitute – “he is a copy of a father as he is seen and experienced in childhood” – and, secondly, that the Evil Demon personifies the corresponding feelings of fear and anger towards the father.²⁷ Father Damien Karras is a deeply demonic figure also under Freudian analysis: his thoughts reveal a male psyche torn between idealised childhood love towards God the Father, and the rage and humiliation evoked by the imperfections and evils that actual life turned out to be. A psychological interpretation at the level of character psychology would suggest that Karras’s anger needs an outlet, and that the demon would offer a particularly suitable

²⁶ Blatty 1983, 20-21.

²⁷ Freud SE 19, 85 (Freud 1923/1978). Ernest Jones discusses the Devil from the Freudian perspective in his *On the Nightmare* (1931/1959, 154-189).

way to attack the “unreasonable” father-figure, who refuses to answer, or to stop the evil.²⁸

STRUCTURING THE FEAR

The narrative structure of *The Exorcist* is simple and efficient. It could be described as “cinematic”; the chapters are quite short and cut straight into the middle of action, the suspense is gradually developed, until some shock climaxes the narrative in the last lines. The next chapter moves the narrative focus elsewhere and starts building up the tension towards the next dramatic blow.²⁹ The book divides into six sections: Prologue (“Northern Iraq”), the first part (“The Beginning,” three chapters), the second part (“The Edge”, five chapters), the third part (“The Abyss,” two chapters), the fourth part (““And let my cry come unto thee...,”” one chapter), and the Epilogue. The Prologue is loaded with ominous details and builds historical perspective: it is situated by the ruins of Biblical Nineveh. The first part relocates the omens in contemporary America. Regan’s mother hears rapping sounds from the attic: “Alien code tapped by a dead man,” is the metaphor used by the narrator.³⁰ After introducing Chris, Regan and their social milieu, and, in a separate thread, Father Karras, the part concludes with the first manifestly supernatural occurrence: Regan is shaken violently in her bed as the mattress starts to quiver.³¹ The second part builds Regan’s possession into a demonic spectacle step by step: Regan calls her father a “cock-sucker” and remembers nothing of it afterwards;³² she undergoes thorough medical and psychiatric examinations and is diagnosed as suffering from a rare “syndrome,” named as “somnambuliform possession.”³³ Her beastly symptoms appear in increasingly violent and spectacular forms; in the first scene she adopts the demonic voice and calls herself (or the demon calls Regan’s body) a swine:

“The sow is *mine!*” she bellowed in a coarse and powerful voice. “She is *mine!* Keep away from her! She is *mine!*”

A yelping laugh gushed up from her throat, and then she fell on her back as if someone had pushed her. She pulled up her nightgown, exposing

²⁸ The connection between blasphemy and unconscious “rebellion” is discussed in the novel; someone had desecrated the church and left a typewritten account of “an imagined homosexual encounter involving the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene,” in perfect church Latin. A “very sick priest” is suspected, Father Karras is interviewed, and soon after that he is relieved of his duties as counselor and ordered to “rest.” (E, 90-91.)

²⁹ Shock, violence and transgressive behaviour has always been an important feature of possession phenomena. Shock effects were adopted into possession films already in the first representative of the genre, the Yiddish *Dybuk* by Michael Waszynski (1937; see Paxton - Toradello 1993). About the subliminal images used in the special effects of *The Exorcist*, see Lucas - Kermode 1991, and Kermode 1991.

³⁰ E, 12.

³¹ E, 79.

³² E, 94.

³³ E, 166.

her genitals. “*Fuck me! Fuck me!*” she screamed at the doctors, and with both her hands began masturbating frantically.

Moments later, Chris ran from the room with a stifled sob when Regan put her fingers to her mouth and licked them.³⁴

Regan also meows like a cat, barks like a dog, neighs like a horse, and – to complete the demonic association with the “lower” animal kingdom – she walks “spiderlike,” body arched backwards with her head almost touching her feet, “her tongue flicking quickly in and out of her mouth while she hissed sibilantly like a serpent.”³⁵ The initially sketched family with its signs of “normalcy” (the divorced mother and a perhaps pampered daughter) acts as the background, which is contrasted with the shocking figure that reverses the normal configuration. A child, as culturally taboo in connection with sexuality, is sexualised; the innocent is thereby presented as somehow “corrupted,” and evil. The structure of accumulating shocks exploits the same principle of inversion elsewhere, too. The second part introduces the traditional detective plot with the murder of director Dennings and the entrance of aforementioned detective Kinderman. Burke Dennings is found dead at the feet of steep stairs under Regan’s window, his head turned completely around, facing backward.³⁶ Detective Kinderman connects the peculiar death with the recent desecrations of churches; this hypothesis is further certified as the expert (Father Karras) and an excerpt from a “scholarly work on witchcraft,” inserted in the text, recount as historical truths some of the most sexually striking witchcraft fantasies connected with Satanism and Black Mass.³⁷ The manner of Dennings’s death is linked to the way the “de-

³⁴ E, 107-8.

³⁵ E, 118-19.

³⁶ E, 146.

³⁷ E, 144-45, 157. As discussed in chapter one, such critically acclaimed scholars as Norman Cohn approach most witchcraft fantasies as culturally powerful myths about frightening “others” among us; the descriptions of the sexually perverse orgies are formulaic, not verified by reliable evidence, and preserved and reproduced in literature (Cohn 1975/1993, 73-5). The popularity of such works as *Rosemary’s Baby* or *The Exorcist* can be also connected with the combination of American forms of paranoia and fundamentalist religiosity; since the 1960s stories of Satanism in the USA began gaining more and more weight, until in the 1980s it surfaced in the form of accusations and trials. Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker describe in their book the widespread belief in the claim that there exists “a massive conspiracy of secret satanist cults that have infiltrated everywhere in the society, from the CIA to police stations to judges’ chambers and churches. The devil worshippers have even secreted themselves in day-care centers and preschools, the story goes, where they pose as teachers.” During the ensuing legal proceedings children’s testimonies “typically included accounts of being raped and sodomized with weapons and other sharp objects [...], of participating in the slaughter of animals and human infants, of being kidnapped in vans, boats, and airplanes, of hearing threats that their parents would be killed if the abuse were disclosed, and of suffering these tortures while the perpetrators engaged in devil-worshipping rituals.” (Nathan - Snedeker 1995, 1-2.) Gerald Messadié states that “what the American Satanist myths reveal most clearly is a collective mental crisis.” The sort of media interest bestowed on these cases suggest that “the myth of Satan serves only as the pretext for pornography,

mons broke the necks of witches,” to the “demonic assassins,” the desecrations, and the idea of a “sick priest.”³⁸ The inversion of Christianity is given literal embodiment in the inversion of the head – the physical violence and sexual perversity are connected with evil. Implicitly, the opposite of evil is defined as non-physical (the spiritual) and as definitely non-sexual. There are no positive sexual relations described in *The Exorcist*.³⁹

RAPING A CHILD

The second part is climaxed by the novel’s most striking shock, the scene which has become the hallmark of *The Exorcist* in its abject sexuality and violence. The original personality of Regan makes its last verbal attempt to resist the power of possessing evil; the penetration of a religious element into Regan’s body has been given a painful expression in the following key section:

[...] Regan, her legs propped up and spread wide on a bed that was violently bouncing and shaking, clutched the bone-white crucifix in raw-knuckled hands, the bone-white crucifix poised at her vagina, the bone-white crucifix she stared at with terror, eyes bulging in a face that was bloodied from the nose, the nasogastric tubing ripped out.

“Oh, please! Oh, no, *please!*” she was shrieking as her hands brought the crucifix closer; as she seemed to be straining to push it away.

“You’ll do as I *tell* you, filth! You’ll *do* it!”

The threatening bellow, the words, came from *Regan*, the voice coarse and guttural [...].

[...]

Then abruptly the demonic face once more possessed her, now filled her, the room choking suddenly with a stench in the nostrils, with an icy cold that seeped from the walls as the rappings ended and Regan’s piercing cry of terror turned to a guttural, yelping laugh of malevolent spite and rage triumphant while she thrust down the crucifix into her vagina and began to masturbate ferociously, roaring in that deep, coarse, deafening voice, “Now you’re *mine*, now you’re *mine*, you stinking cow! You bitch! Let Jesus *fuck* you, *fuck* you!”

Chris stood rooted on the ground in horror, frozen, her hands pressing tight against her cheeks as again the demonic laugh cackled joyously, as Regan’s vagina gushed blood onto sheets with her hymen, the tissues ripped.

sadism, and [...] mythomaniacal fantasies” (Messadié 1993/1996, 317). The particular mixture of anger, loathing and prurient fascination suggest social and moral anxieties as well as circuitous means for satisfying suppressed desires. (For some social explanations, see Nathan - Snedeker 1995, 29-50.)

³⁸ E, 152-3.

³⁹ The only possible exception, Sharon’s (Chris’s “blonde secretary”) relationship to her lawyer-boyfriend (the “horseman”) is explicitly removed from family life into the (morally questionable) domain of something paid for and temporary; “Sharon needed a place to be alone, Chris then decided, and had moved her to a suite in an expensive hotel and insisted on paying the bill.” (E, 24.)

[...]

[Chris] thought she saw hazily, in a swimming fog, her daughter's head turning slowly around on a motionless torso, rotating monstrously, inexorably, until at last it seemed facing backward.

"Do you know what she *did*, your cunting daughter?" giggled an elfin, familiar voice.⁴⁰

The outrageous violence towards a child has been designed to rouse anger towards the demonic perpetrator. When producing the movie version, Blatty himself advocated powerfully that the masturbation scene should be included: "That was the most horrible thing that came to my mind, and that's why it is in the film."⁴¹ The combination of a girl's body, sexuality in the form of ambiguous rape/masturbation, murderous violence, and religious sacrilege mark the commencement of the possession proper, and guide the reading of demonic conflicts in the future. The scene also highlights the moral dilemmas facing the reader of Male Gothic fiction; the actions may be attributed to a demon, but it also subjects the female victim to sadistic sexual exploitation by a characteristically male villain. The violation is also graphically described and sanctioned by the male author, and directed to the gaze of the male-dominated horror audience. In the US, the counterreaction to pornography led into demonisation of male sexuality itself; "Fucking," the feminist critic Andrea Dworkin wrote in 1976, "is the means by which the male colonizes the female."⁴² The grotesque and phallic figure of the demon Pazuzu hovers behind young Regan's bed; the actions of exorcising (male) priests around this same site of battle contribute to the interpretation of Evil in *The Exorcist* as demonised male sexuality. *The Exorcist* is first and foremost a work of horror, and it aims to unsettle the reader in various ways; demonic male sexuality has been an essential feature of the genre since *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Monk*. As an interpretation of the male self to the male audience, the Male Gothic evokes particular forms of abjection – ambivalent recognition of self in its other – that combine the fascinating and threatening dimensions of desire for a male reader. As Testa pointed out, desire is both an expression of the self, and potentially a destroyer of self. The uncanny movement between simultaneous male self-recognition and self-rejection empowers the demonic conflicts in *The Exorcist*.

In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), Barbara Creed offers an alternative, feminist reading. She writes that in *The Exorcist* possession "becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject – and perversely appeal-

⁴⁰ E, 189-91.

⁴¹ Travers - Reiff 1974, 83.

⁴² Andrea Dworkin, "Sexual Economics: The Terrible Truth" (published in *Letters from a War Zone*, 1989); quoted in Nathan - Snedeker 1995, 41. For demonisation of males, see also a recent, provocative study, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Wrangham - Peterson 1996).

ing.”⁴³ She raises the interesting question about the way *The Exorcist* uses woman’s body to represent its central conflict. Her analysis of this conflict, however, is from my perspective quite disappointing. She has obviously not read the novel, and therefore builds her interpretation only on the material that found its way into the movie version.⁴⁴ Creed insists that the most central struggle in *The Exorcist* is “between men and women, the ‘fathers’ and the ‘mothers.’”⁴⁵ To support this claim she heavily emphasises the role of some minor characters (old “hag” figures that do not appear in the original novel) and builds a theory that Regan is actually possessed by a “‘female’ devil” and that the source of the demonic could thereby be situated in the mother-child relationship. She defends this claim through the fact that the voice of the demon was that of actress Mercedes McCambridge, a woman.⁴⁶ The relationship between mother and a child holds special significance in *The Exorcist*, but Creed’s interpretation, to my mind, almost completely ignores the most important aspects of the particular conflicts that empower the demonic in this work. Her interpretation is also somewhat unconvincing as a reading of the film: the masculine, phallic figure of the possessing demon (Pazuzu) is visibly displayed both in the beginning of the film, and made to appear behind the possessed Regan in the exorcism sequence.⁴⁷ Creed does not mention the significant amount of sickness portrayed in the connection of male figures: the trembling hands of old Father Merrin as he gropes for nitro-glycerine pills in the pain of his heart disease; the blind man being led; the man with a cataract in his one eye – just to mention some ex-

⁴³ Creed 1993, 31.

⁴⁴ Creed writes of the masturbation scene that it “is not clear if the blood is menstrual or caused by self-mutilation although we do know that Regan has just entered puberty” (ibid., 35). The quoted section from the novel explicitly mentions that Regan’s “vagina gushed blood onto sheets” because the tissues of her hymen had been ripped. This underlines the religious character of this particular form of violence (the Catholic prohibition of premarital sex and the mythical importance connected with feminine virginity being here the immediate concerns). Creed also supposes that Regan is celebrating her thirteenth birthday (ibid., 40) during the narrated episodes (actually twelfth).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38-9. – The director’s explanation for the use of female actor was that “I decided a woman should do the voice instead of a man because I felt it would be more in keeping with the fact that it was a little girl that was possessed” (Travers - Reiff 1974, 196).

⁴⁷ The essential and necessary connection of the demonic with the female becomes problematic also on other grounds. The original 1949 case of possession that Blatty was using was centred on a 14-year old boy. Blatty explains that he met with the exorcist of that case, and that afterwards the exorcist “wrote to me and implored that I not write anything that would connect the victim in the case to the material in my novel. I thought he was going far, far overboard, but I decided to change the character from a boy to a girl.” (Travers - Reiff 1974, 17.) One might suspect that this is not the only reason; Blatty has here made a conscious choice to have a female victim subjected to the demonic male power, which is typical for the Male Gothic tradition. There are male child-demons in contemporary horror, as well. The cool menace emanating from little Damien (Father Karras’s namesake) in *The Omen*, for example, nevertheless reveals even more clearly the carnivalesque power embodied by the figure of the possessed Regan.

amples from the first minutes of the movie version. The demonic in *The Exorcist* can not be reduced to the conflict between sexes, even if the female body and sexuality (both male and female) play special roles in it.



Statue of Pazuzu (Collections of Musée du Louvre).

“THE TROUBLE WITH THE SIGNS IN THE SKY”

The third part of the novel, “The Abyss,” centres around Father Karras and his investigation. The problematic status of religion is thematised in Karras’s search: he has to find evidence of a demon, a bad spirit, acting in Regan, but since he is a secularly trained scientist (a psychiatrist) as well as a priest, he always finds “natural” reasons for counterevidence. As he posits such “supernatural” phenomena as telepathy or telekinesis among “natural,” not spiritual phenomena (they are studied by scientists as expressions of “paranormal” faculty or energy), his search for “genuine signs” is in danger of be-

coming futile. The role of different signs and omens is so central in *The Exorcist* that the whole work can be interpreted in those terms. Noël Carroll, in his *The Philosophy of Horror*, takes *The Exorcist* as his paradigmatic example of the “complex discovery plot”: the classic structure underlying many narratives of horror (including *Dracula*, *Jaws*, *Carrie*, *The Omen* etc.). In this structure the opponent, such as a monster, or evil power, is assumed to be separate from the protagonists of the story. The plot divides into four phases or functions: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation. The onset of horror gives the first signs of evil presence to the audience. In the phase of discovery the presence of the monster is revealed to someone in the story, but it yet has to be proved to yet another, initially sceptical party before the actual resistance can begin. This is what is accomplished during the confirmation phase, and the confrontation acts out the actual fight against the opponent figure.⁴⁸ Carroll situates the confirmation in *The Exorcist* in “The Abyss”; if the Prologue and the Epilogue are merged to the first and the last chapter, respectively, the remaining four parts of *The Exorcist* could well have functioned as the direct inspiration to Carroll’s theory, so nicely they fit this model. The religious engagement with the opponent cannot start before the authority figure has been convinced – even if the medical authority in the second part had already ended up recommending the ritual of exorcism. As Carroll writes, “an extended drama of proof preoccupies the text.”⁴⁹

Karras, the psychiatrist, is concerned with the integrity of psyche – his goal is to study the demonic personality as an expression of Regan’s psychic conflicts and find ways back to unity. Karras, the priest, is concerned with Regan’s soul, the immortal nucleus of her self – his goal is to face the enemy and to expel it from the body it has misappropriated. On the surface, it seems that Regan is the one with problems and the one who has an element of her mind dissociated from its whole. Karras, however, is an equally divided personality, and because he is acting as the protagonist and the exorcising subject (Regan as his restrained object) his dilemmas of integrity and rejection, faith and knowledge relate in important ways to the central themes and structures of the work.⁵⁰

The “drama of proof” is not confined to the third part of the novel. From the beginning, the reader is offered signs and omens that could suggest the presence and influence of supernatural evil. At the same time, the reader is also given contrary clues that suggest a “natural” explanation. These opposing elements in the text position reader into the divided and

⁴⁸ Carroll 1990, 99-103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁰ Blatty: “My typist had been working on the novel. She didn’t offer any editorial comment, so halfway through I asked for her reaction. She said, ‘They’re after him.’ I said, ‘Who?’ She said, ‘You know, them. They’re after Father Karras.’ Well, she picked up on what half the readers do not – that it is Karras, not the little girl. Karras was going to be lost forever or he was going to be saved. This is his crucible.” (Travers - Reiff 1974, 15.)

conflicting role that Father Karras then occupies as the reader's representative. For example, the early behaviour of possessed Regan and the initial manifestations of evil hint at psychological motivations, Regan's parents have divorced, she might be feeling unconscious guilt and, as well, the demonic first appears as a "fantasy playmate" named Captain Howdy (perhaps after "Howard," Regan's father).⁵¹ The reader is also explicitly told that before the full-fledged possession phenomena start to manifest themselves, a book describing these matters "disappears" – supposedly Regan takes it and reads the descriptions.⁵² The natural and supernatural explanations start warring. The dialectic between the unexplained and the possible answers is another important feature of horror; Carroll calls it "erotetic narration."⁵³ A horror story creates suspense and an important dimension in it is the unknown: the narrative evokes a series of questions in the reader, and his interest in the plot has much to do with the manner it answers these questions.⁵⁴ The medical, psychological and religious explanations form a three-partite structure in creating the "answer" of *The Exorcist*.

The medical answer suggests a biological explanation: Regan has some organic dysfunction in her body, like a brain lesion. The medical solution is articulated through the use of medical instruments and drugs. The graphical violence these physical remedies inflict on Regan's body are explored especially in the movie version: spinal fluid, mixed with blood, spurts during a lumbar puncture. The violent movements and noises of arteriographic machinery reach diabolical dimensions. The names of medication gain occult resonances: *Ritalin*, *Librium*.

In the next phase the occult character of healing rituals is underlined even further. The psychiatric treatment is staged as a session with Regan answering questions under hypnotic trance. The theme of diabolical inversion is evoked: the demonic personality gives his/her answers in English, but it is spoken backwards. No one (except perhaps the reader) notices the messages hidden in Regan's "gibberish" (decoded between the square brackets in the following dialogue):

"Who are you?"
 "Nowonmai," she answered gutturally. ["I am No-one."]
 "That's your name?"
 She nodded.
 "You're a man?"
 She said, "Say." ["Yes."]
 [...]
 "Where do you come from?"
 "Dog." ["God."]

⁵¹ E, 37.

⁵² E, 104.

⁵³ Carroll 1990, 130-36.

⁵⁴ See also *Terrors of Uncertainty* (1989) by Joseph Gixti; this study adopts the Todorovian stance that cognitive uncertainty is central for the analysis of horror.

“You say you come from a dog?”
 “Dogmorfmocion,” Regan replied. [“No. I come from God.”]⁵⁵

The inversion of “God” into “dog” exploits precisely that sort of blasphemous and carnivalesque possibilities that the demonic tradition seems to invite (see later, in the analysis of Clive Barker’s play, for a similar case).⁵⁶ The serious and comical mix in a way that particularly points towards the ambivalent status of “holy,” and may evoke disconcerting effects on a reader with (perhaps suppressed) religious sentiments. In *The Exorcist* the lines that the demonic voice delivers backwards seem to convey a more “truthful” or “deeper” knowledge about the demon and the condition of the possessed Regan (the speaker is in those cases either unconscious, or, as in this case, hypnotised and thereby in contact with “the unconscious”). The demon is actually saying that he is “from God,” and thereby hinting that the evil is the property and responsibility of God the Father. That the psychiatrist hears this as “dog,” has blasphemous implications, operating as a transgressive gesture: it debases the holy and continues the tendency to demonise biology. The animal operates here, as in Regan’s demonic displays, as the symbol of inverted spirituality, or divinity. The “psychiatric ritual” is carnivalised even further when the possessed Regan grasps his/her hypnotist by the testicles; Freudian reductionism (that everything in human behaviour is derived from sexual impulses and conflicts) is ridiculed in a violent and graphical manner.⁵⁷

The third answer, articulated through the ritual of exorcism, is the one *The Exorcist* is aiming at. The drama of proof in “The Abyss” confronts Father Karras with the hard task of confirming the demonic presence, and also introduces the reader to new aspects of the demonic personality. The task is to isolate some indubitable sign of inhuman influence; as *The Roman Ritual* quoted in the novel puts it in its rules for exorcists – “verifiable exterior phenomena which suggest the idea that they are due to the extraordinary intervention of an intelligent cause other than man.”⁵⁸ Since Karras thinks that

⁵⁵ E, 124.

⁵⁶ See below, p. 192. – The use of inversion to denote entrance into the demonic, alternate order of things is an ancient gesture, used by shamans dressing up as women to consult spirits, or in carnivals where a fool will be king. A famous example from modern literature can be found in the infernal “Circe” chapter closing the second part of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Among its torrent of polyphony “The Voice of All the Damned” calls: “Htengier Tnetopinmo Dog Drol eht rof, Aiulella!” And the voice of “Adonai” responds: “Dooooooooooooog!” This dialogue is then mirrored in the exchange between Adonai and “The Voice of All the Blessed.” (Joyce 1922/1949, 584.)

⁵⁷ E, 126.

⁵⁸ E, 225. – “De Exorcismus et supplicationibus quibusdam,” a new version of the ritual was approved by Pope John Paul II on October 1, 1998, and officially released by the Vatican on January 26, 1999. The new version replaces one which was issued as a part of the Roman Ritual of 1614. It continues to recognise the existence of the Devil and the reality of the diabolical possession, as well as to confirm the victory of Christ and the power of the Church over the demons.

“paranormal” activity is tied to the psychology and physiology of man, it constitutes no proof. The demonic personality supplies abundantly evidence – it converses in Latin and speaks about its “time in Rome” with intelligence and rhetorical flourish; it refers to Christian demonology and calls itself the devil, “prince,” and refers to the plurality of the New Testament demoniac (“a poor little family of wandering souls” with “no place to go”); the souls of the dead seem to make appearances (the murdered Dennings, Karras’s mother); it reads thoughts and knows the hidden secrets.⁵⁹ This is to no avail: as the demonic voice states, it is giving Karras evidence, but also always some reason for doubt – and it is always possible for an intelligent sceptic to find counterarguments. “That is why I’m fond of you,” the demon states with obvious ironic relish. “That is why I cherish *all* reasonable men.”⁶⁰

Scientific scepticism and rationalism have here become effectively demonised. They are on the side of evil, stopping people in their efforts to believe, and save their souls. The literary model for the interpretation of diabolical as inner scepticism is to be found in Dostoyevsky; the words of the demon have an echo of the devil in Ivan’s delirium: “I have been leading you between belief and disbelief alternately, and in doing so I have had my own purpose.”⁶¹ *The Brothers Karamazov* is an important subtext for Blatty, and it is prominently referred to in numerous places of *Legion*.⁶² The reader of *The Exorcist* is led to the position where reason starts to appear deeply dubious, and obstructing Karras in his task to help the suffering girl. There is profound irony in the text as the demon reminds Karras, the psychiatrist, that the role of the unconscious should not be forgotten.⁶³ The implied reader realises that the evil spirit is toying with Karras, ridiculing him, and that Karras’s loss of faith has made him an easy target for the enemy. Reason alone, Karras’s case seems to prove, is not a sufficient basis for human life. One has to have some other foundation.

GROPING FOR FOUNDATION

The solution that Karras finally finds is interesting, because it joins together several aspects touched upon in this analysis. Karras’s attempts to find proof of the demon are centred on language. Almost all characters of the novel, including Chris, Regan’s mother, even the Jesuit priests, are using “adult language,” that is, profanities with either a religious or sexual character. “Jesus Christ,” “Hell,” “for pete’s sake” mix with expressions such as “fucking,” “cunting,” or “ass” in people’s speech as well as in their reported

⁵⁹ The three discussions with the demonic personality that take place in the confirmation phase: E, 203-8, 232-39, 265-67.

⁶⁰ E, 237, 267.

⁶¹ Dostoyevsky 1880/1993, 745.

⁶² Blatty 1983, 9, 12, 248-50. A possible structural relationship can also be noted: *The Brothers Karamazov*, after all, is subtitled “A Novel in Four Parts and an Epilogue.”

⁶³ E, 266.

stream-of-consciousness. The heterogeneity and blasphemous nature of this language points toward the modern condition: nothing is sacred any more.⁶⁴ The voice of the demon is just an amplified and exaggerated version of the same mixture; the demonic language is playing with all the signs indiscriminately – it transgresses the limits of the holy and the profane, the significant and the senseless, and aims only at chaos and despair. The linguistic analysis of the demonic voice as compared to Regan’s own does not reveal the conclusive evidence of two distinct personalities: the “cold” analytical mind is unable to reach resolution. However, as Karras listens to Regan’s own voice (a taped message to her father), he momentarily finds certainty: “through the roaring of blood in his ears, like the ocean, as up through his chest and his face swelled an overwhelming intuition: *The thing that I saw in that room wasn’t Regan!*”⁶⁵ Karras is spurred to stop ruminating by the thought and image of his recently deceased mother; the mother is identified with Regan – “The eyes [of his mother] became Regan’s ... eyes shrieking ... eyes waiting.... [/] “*Speak but the word....*”⁶⁶ Significantly, his mother was illiterate; a Greek immigrant, she was unable to either read or write any English.⁶⁷ When Karras is lost in his futile attempts to find the significant sign among the torrent of demonic communication, he comes across a faded language exercise book that Mary Karras had used in her “adult education”: letters of alphabet, over and over, and then an attempt at a letter:⁶⁸

The image shows a facsimile of handwritten text in cursive. The first line reads "Dear Dimmy," and the second line reads "I have been waiting". The handwriting is shaky and wavy, with some ink bleed-through and irregular spacing between letters and words.

The facsimile of “mother’s handwriting,” with its shaky and wavering line, intrudes itself among the printed line of intellectual thought, among arguments and counterarguments. It bears the mark of his mother’s body, her shaking hand and the emotional tie that Karras feels as painful guilt; as a priest, he has not been able to help his mother in her poverty, nor get her better treatment as she was dying in a mental institution. The problem of faith Karras is experiencing is connected with the body, and specifically the maternal body – religious faith has emerged as love, as the elevated, pure and spiritual form of love that also functions as an escape from the imperfections and “dirt” of the “low” domain of bodily love. Karras’s thoughts and perceptions in his mother’s apartment warrant such an interpretation:

⁶⁴ In the movie version the swearing is even more striking, as is the use of alcohol and cigarettes; all the adult characters appear to be neurotic chain-smokers. – See also the discussion on the sacred and the blasphemy in chapter ten.

⁶⁵ E, 229.

⁶⁶ E, 228.

⁶⁷ E, 47.

⁶⁸ E, 227-8.

He went to the bathroom. Yellowing newspaper spread on the tile. Stains of rust in the tub and the sink. On the floor, an old corset. Seeds of the vocation. From these he had fled into love. Now the love had grown cold. In the night, he heard it whistling through the chambers of his heart like a lost, crying wind.⁶⁹

In her study *Monstrous Imagination* (1993), Marie-Hélène Huet has researched how the female power of procreation has also been regarded with fear through ages. There is a possibility of monstrosity connected with the biological process of procreation, and the ensuing anxiety demands some explanation. One old one is that “monsters were signs sent by God, messages showing his will or his wrath.”⁷⁰ The monstrously metamorphosing body of the possessed Regan is a sign of abjection; the language of the body is inarticulate and terrifying. Kristeva registers the possibility that it is only by “separating the speaking being from his body,” that the latter can “accede to the status of clean and proper body, that is to say, non-assimilable, uneatable, abject.” She notes how the fear of “the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from my body”: the speaking subject operates on the symbolic level, and fear of pollution is in many cultures a necessary accompaniment for the establishment of subjectivity. “Non-separation would threaten the whole society with disintegration.”⁷¹ Father Karras attempts to listen to the chaotic stream of multiple voices emanating from the body, but he is horrified, baffled and cannot find meaning in what he hears.

[*The backward demonic voices in the tape:*] ... danger. Not yet. [indecipherable] will die. Little time. Now the [indecipherable]. Let her die. No, no, sweet! it is sweet in the body! I feel! There is [indecipherable]. Better [indecipherable] than the void. I fear the priest. Give us time. Fear the priest! He is [indecipherable]. No, not this one: the [indecipherable], the one who [indecipherable]. He is ill. Ah, the blood, feel the blood, how it [sings?]⁷²

Karras’s separation from bodily, profane reality, as well as his celibacy and vow of poverty are essential components for his priestly identity. When society supports the division between the sacred and the profane this separation can have its positive, structuring meaning. However, this border does not hold in the world of *The Exorcist*, as the medley of religious and sexual obscenities, professional jargons and sacred texts exhibit on the linguistic level. The language of student rebellions, a telephone call about Karras’s mother’s illness, the pathologist’s report, foreign religions, books by psychologists, books about witchcraft, the Holy Scripture: the various materials

⁶⁹ E, 47.

⁷⁰ Huet 1993, 6. – Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* (1994) suggests further possibilities for analysis.

⁷¹ Kristeva 1980/1982, 78-9.

⁷² E, 273.

do not contribute to each other, they war and invalidate each other – the stylistic surface of *The Exorcist* is fragmented and heterogeneous. The clear-cut identities and domains separated by distinct borders are threatened; the Word of God is replaced by demonic textuality, a chaotic play of various competing discourses with no stable foundation. To quote Kristeva again, in a world “in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task – a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct – amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression.”⁷³ The section titled “The Abyss” concludes as Karras is faced with another handwriting. On the chest of the unconscious, restrained Regan letters appear – a “bas-relief script rising in clear letters of blood-red skin.”

Two words:

help me

“That’s her handwriting,” whispered Sharon.⁷⁴

This “bodily writing” is intimately connected with the mother-child relationship; after all, Karras’s own inarticulate, sick mother had been desperately trying to write to him. At the bottom of the Abyss Karras faces the demonic Other, only to find the repressed body – the body taking the figure of a child in need of love and protection. After reading the message, the first thing the next morning, Karras proceeds and asks for permission to seek an exorcism.

FACING THE DEMONIC RIFT

The open confrontation that occupies the remaining part of the novel basically just affirms the intuition reached at the end of the confirmation phase. The fourth part, “And let my cry come unto thee...,” describes the actual exorcism. It is the culmination of *The Exorcist* as a religious work; it is characteristic of the demonic conflicts operating in it, that the ritual actually fails. The end of the novel tries hard to make Father Karras a Christ-like figure and hero of faith. When Karras’s friend, Father Dyer, ponders on what he last saw in the eyes of the dying man, he remembers “a look of joy” – “a deep and fiercely shining glint of ... triumph?”⁷⁵ The value of priesthood is reconfirmed; the healed Regan looks at his round Roman collar and impulsively kisses the priest. The fact is, nevertheless, that the exorcism went wrong precisely in the way Karras feared it would: both of the exorcising priests ended up dead, Father Merrin after heart attack, Father Karras

⁷³ Kristeva 1980/1982, 18.

⁷⁴ E, 277.

⁷⁵ E, 339.



Father Karras (Jason Miller) observing, as Sharon (Kitty Winn) presents him with the writing on Regan's chest. From The Exorcist (dir. William Friedkin).

© Warner Bros., 1973.

after becoming possessed and making a suicidal jump by charging through the window.

Andriano argued that the frequent association between the demonic and femininity in the Male Gothic is connected with fears of male identity – the “anima” is rejected and repressed because it threatens gender boundaries. Possession behaviour is an ancient way of confronting the repressed and conflicting areas of the psyche by engaging in transgressive behaviour. Horror culture is a contemporary, liminoid area where it is possible to deal with similar activities under the guise of entertainment. *The Exorcist* combines these two, and puts into use some essential threats to the self – on a general level, the uncertainty of body as the defective, and yet necessary, “supplement” to the mind. In a more specific analysis, the male psyche in connection with Christian and Catholic identity and the menaces of the modern world open up as the arena for this drama.

The male identity of Karras is reinforced in several points in the text; as Karras unbuttons the sleeve of his starched white shirt, and rolls it up, he

exposes “a matting of fine brown hairs on a bulging, thickly muscled forearm.”⁷⁶ Damien Karras is not only a priest and a psychiatrist, he has also been a boxer in his youth, and still, after physical exercise “the heave of his rock-muscled chest and shoulders stretched his T-shirt.”⁷⁷ When the two priests march in silence to commence with the exorcism the narrative is focalised through Chris MacNeil’s consciousness: “Chris felt deeply and strangely moved. *Here comes my big brother to beat your brains in, creep!* It was a feeling, she thought, much like that. She could feel her heart begin to beat faster.”⁷⁸ Even though the acknowledged aim appears to be a spiritual encounter with the forces of evil, the spiritual is constantly replaced by a much more physical sort of heroism. It is useful to make a comparison here to an important modern work in Christian demonological fiction, *Screwtape Letters* (1942) by C.S. Lewis. Despite all the modern features and pervasive irony of this work, the “happy ending” (as the young male protagonist dies before he succumbs to sin) really makes sense only within the Christian doctrine of salvation and the kingdom of God. Father Karras, in contrast, cannot let Regan die, even if she is theologically “safe”: the demon cannot touch the will of the possessed and Regan is thereby free from sin – her death would just mean eternal life.⁷⁹ As the demon declares that it aims to kill Regan by exhaustion – her heart is weakening – and after the heart of Father Merrin fails, Karras ends this cardiac drama by physical fight. He does not, after all, believe in spirits or afterlife: it is only appropriate that he fights his own demons with his own flesh.

“*You son of a bitch!*” Karras seethed in a whisper that hissed into air like molten steel. “*You bastard!*” Though he did not move, he seemed to be uncoiling, the sinews of his neck pulling taunt like cables. The demon stopped laughing and eyed him with malevolence. “*You were losing! You’re a loser! You’ve always been a loser!*” Regan splattered him with vomit. He ignored it. “*Yes, you’re very good with children!*” he said, trembling. “*Little girls! Well, come on! Let’s see you try something bigger! Come on!*” He had his hands out like great, fleshy hooks, beckoning slowly. “*Come on! Come on, loser! Try me! Leave the girl and take me! Take me! Come into ...*”⁸⁰

The evil in *The Exorcist* is connected with lack of love and lack of faith, basically emotional problems not to be resolved by purely rational and intellectual means. Karras is disgusted by the ugliness and imperfections of the life with his mother that he had left behind; an early confrontation with a filthy alcoholic presents the reader with Karras’s inability to love this wretched figure who stammers “I’m a Cat’lic,” and demands Christian

⁷⁶ E, 209.

⁷⁷ E, 148.

⁷⁸ E, 300.

⁷⁹ E, 311.

⁸⁰ E, 328.

love.⁸¹ Later, during the exorcism, Father Merrin explains that the demon is exploiting this particular problem in his case as well: “Certain people ... repelled me. How could I love them?” The demon in *The Exorcist* is designed to strike this problem: “the demon’s target is not the possessed; it is us ... the observers.” Merrin continues the explication:

I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien: to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly; unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in the unworthiness. For I think belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it finally is a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love *us*....⁸²

The character of Father Merrin is inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a Catholic priest and scientist. In the world of *The Exorcist* Father Merrin – “the philosopher-paleontologist! the soaring, staggering intellect!” – has the last word. The material world appears as the problem, and Merrin has striven in his books to develop a theory that matter is still evolving, destined to be spirit and join to God.⁸³ A non-authorial reader is free to interpret the coldness of the grave, the stench of decay surrounding the possessed body of Regan as expressions of a particular demonic conflict, the religious refusal to love the body that is waging war against suppressed male desires – a traditional and powerful conflict in Christianity. This is amply evidenced in the wrathful Christian and Gnostic writings, which characterise the body as the “grave of soul,” and especially describe the abject physicality of the female body.⁸⁴ When Karras lets his anger burst out, he, for the first time in the novel, dares to touch Regan and simultaneously emotionally react to her. It is symptomatic that he can do this only by violently attacking her – or the demon that he identifies as embodied in her.

⁸¹ E, 46.

⁸² E, 311.

⁸³ E, 287.

⁸⁴ The basic conflict with corporeality is manifest in St. Paul: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good, so then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” (Rom. 7:14-19. See also 1 Cor. 7: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.”) The Christian relationship and battle with evil “flesh” is a complex history; Brown 1988 is a remarkably understanding and compassionate reading of sexual renunciation in early Christianity. For a classic document of ambivalence towards the female sexuality, see “Letter to Eustochium” by St. Jerome (Letter 22 in Jerome 1963, 134-79). Misogyny in Western (and Christian) history is now widely discussed, especially in feminism (see such works as *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* [1966] by Katharine M. Rogers, *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity’s Creation of Sex War in the West* [1986] by Karen Armstrong, or *The Dark Side of Christian History* [1995] by Helen Ellerbe).

The cathartic ending of *The Exorcist* as a demonic text is necessarily also tragic. Karras faces in the end his daimonic impulses and dares to confront them, and to recognise the demonic conflict as his own. This particular tragedy does not end in *eudaimonia*; the power of the daimonic is represented as too destructive for integration into Karras's conflicted identity as a man and as a Christian. His spiritual integrity is salvaged, but only in the death of his body. The dualistic conflict is represented as a fundamental rift in the ground of the self; full self-recognition also means self-destruction.

My analysis of *The Exorcist* has focused on the role of Father Karras, and on the ambiguous "textual self" that this novel constructs. Like Karras, who is trying to find faith in the love of God, but is continuously possessed by disgust and hatred towards the body and the material world, *The Exorcist* attempts to "make a positive statement about the God" but ends up demonising the human condition.

The demon possessing young Regan effectively articulates conflicts in identity, but not Regan's. She is a medium for the anxiety towards the feminine and the corporeal to burst out. It is the abject relationship of an insecurely male and religious self to his own, rejected and repressed desires that, in the final analysis, possesses the pages of *The Exorcist*.

The next chapter analyses Anne Rice's vampire novels and changes the point of view to the "other side" – that of the monsters themselves.