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Exorcising the Past

Voices for the Present

MICHAEL GREEN

Can we find any imaginative connection with women like Gemma Galgani? Like her medieval predecessors . . . she was beaten by devils. Like them, she performed miracles of healing after her death. When you look at her strange life, you wonder what kind of language you can use to talk about her – through which discipline will you approach her? (Mantel 2004: 3).

*DURING THE YEARS 1906–7 very strange and wonderful things happened at St Michael's, a Mission Station situated halfway between Umzinto and Ixopo (Stuartstown), Natal, begins a 152-page document handwritten in Port Shepstone, Natal, and dated October 1932. It is entitled 'Positive Facts of Mysterious Occurrences, Demoniactal Possession', and the writer is Father Erasmus Hörner R.M.M., who announces himself as *Eye and EAR Witness* to the events he records.¹*

Hörner came from Rhine-Palatinate Germany to join the monastery of Mariannahill, situated just outside Pinetown, Natal, in 1892. Upon completing his two years noviciate, he was sent to several of Mariannahill's other stations before working as a missionary at St Michael's from 1906 to 1920.

St Michael's had earned something of a reputation well before Hörner's arrival. It was started in 1855, making it the oldest Catholic native mission in Natal and perhaps the whole of South Africa. Its original

location was further inland, but 'the tribes there were not disposed to be friendly' (Dischl 1982: 53) and they attacked and destroyed the buildings barely eight months after they were built. A new and less ambitious site was found on a Zulu reserve just inland from Umzinto, where a chapel was built, but within a year this too was abandoned. Another attempt was made at the original site in 1860, but given up by 1861. 'The kafirs', wrote the first Bishop of the Natal diocese, Bishop Allard, 'have refused the divine seed' (Dischl 1982: 53).

St Michael's remained deserted for some time hereafter, although Bishop Allard's successor, Bishop Jolivet, made further efforts at reviving the mission when a group of Trappists applied to resettle in Natal in 1882. Initially recruited from Bosnia by Bishop Ricards of the Eastern Cape vicariate, they had fallen out with him and Bishop Jolivet assigned them to St Michael's. Their leader, Father Franz Pfanner, refused to go there however, purely on the basis of the unfavourable climatic and geographic reports he had of the mission (Schimlek 1953: 34). Instead, he founded the enormously successful Mariannahill Monastery just north of Durban, which was, within three years, made the first abbey in South Africa. By 1887 its success was such that it 'had become numerically the largest abbey in the world' (Brain 1975: 173).

Much of this success was dependent upon Mariannahill's missionary work, in particular the founding of a chain of outstations and missions stretching up towards the Drakensberg Mountains and around into East Griqualand. This was an odd enterprise for a house of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (the proper name of the order commonly known as Trappists) to become engaged in. A cloistered, contemplative community, the order's rules prohibit overt apostolic activity.² Originating in France in the seventeenth century as a reform movement within the Cistercians, the Trappists were a monastic order that aimed at the strict observance of the original Rule of Saint Benedict. This included 'withdrawal from the world, solitude, silence, prayer in choir, meditation, spiritual reading, fasting, and manual work' (Roos 1983: 8).

Bishop Ricards's original aim in bringing a Trappist contingent to the Eastern Cape was that it would, through the silent example of

Christian virtue and manual labour, succeed in attracting the indigenous people to Christianity, since they had thus far shown themselves immune to the standard strategies of missionary evangelism.³ Following methods used in medieval times, the Trappists concentrated first on establishing the monastery that enabled them to carry on their traditional Cistercian way of life. The aim thereafter, as William Brown puts it, was 'to build a Christian community of Bantu on the estates of the monastery' (1960: 233), but never through hasty evangelism.

By 1886, requests from chiefs in other areas had drawn Father Pfanner into a process of establishing a network of missions developed along the same lines as the monastery, and in 1890 he felt sufficiently confident to make good on his promise to take on the station originally offered to him (Gamble 1982: 58–59).

Bishop Jolivet had sent a number of priests to St Michael's after Pfanner's initial refusal to found his monastery there, each of whom had failed. The station was never worked as a farm, no converts were made, and only a few children reluctantly and irregularly attended the school. A local chief challenged the limits of the mission's lands, winning a formal legal dispute in this regard, and the people settled on the mission lands refused to pay rent. The first priest, Father Mathieu, left after two wretched years and the priest who followed him, Father Barthélemy, surrendered his faith while at the mission, leaving both the order and the church. A layman was sent next to act as missionary, but he directed endless memoranda and letters of complaint to the Colonial Secretary and even to the Secretary for Native Affairs regarding squatters, a lack of labour, faction fights and land claims.⁴ Finally, H.C. Shepstone was driven to comment: 'These mission reserves are now beginning to cause a great deal of trouble in the Colony, owing to the wish of the missionaries to be chiefs in them' (Brain 1975: 109). This was more than enough for Bishop Jolivet to reopen negotiations with Pfanner regarding the mission station.

The four sisters that Pfanner sent to open a convent at St Michael's in 1890 bore out the reputation of the mission. They found that not one of the children in the school was baptised, and noticed a marked animosity

among them. They were reported to be persistently disobedient and stubborn, while their elders kept a cautious distance from everything to do with the mission. One of the earliest remarks in the convent's chronicle reads: 'Many sacrifices will be required before these souls are freed from Satan's snares' (Buschgerd 1990: 196).

Mariannahill's approach to missionary work seemed to be successful, however. By 1895, after five years of Trappist administration, there were 60 Christians on the property, 26 boys and 73 girls attended the school on a regular basis, and a church was being built. Eight monks and nine nuns lived in the glebe, working with rigour and determination. A year later, Bishop Jolivet visited St Michael's to find the church complete and '70 natives' presenting themselves for confirmation. By 1906, when Father Hörner arrived at St Michael's, 862 baptisms had been recorded and there were 40 catechumens (Brain 1975: 156).

None of these successes entirely did away with the mission's reputation. *When I arrived I had to replace Fr. Mansuet Poll, a pious and zealous priest*, Hörner writes at the beginning of his account. *He had only been at St Michael's nine or ten months. He did his work with energy and zeal, but he also spent hours in the church before the altar, and sitting in his little room weeping.*

He told me what he considered I ought to know, and left . . . blessing God for his release.

Hörner then launches immediately into what he insists – again and again – are the 'positive facts' of the 'mysterious occurrences' he witnessed. In summarising these events, it is difficult to avoid producing only a catalogue of their overtly dramatic moments. The very nature of the events Hörner records is of the spectacle, but if the possessions are to have any significance beyond this, we must take them seriously in the way they seem to demand – as a bodying forth of the unseen with a view to its becoming not only a dramatic scene, but something that through the forcefulness of its presentation demands to be seen and seen in a certain way: as something that must be read, interpreted, un-encoded. The bodies of the possessed are turned into texts of the invisible forces expressed through them. Approached in this way, a kind of coherence does surface – possibly even a reading that responds to a certain range of historical evidence and material explanation.

To begin, however, with the spectacle: *Strange things happened to a Native, 'Klara Germana Cele' by name, a girl of 16–17 years*, Hörner starts out. Germana was a pupil at St Michael's, *tolerably gifted*, as he puts it and *merry and gay, full of tricks*. *Soon after taking her first communion, however, she became morose and sad* and on 5 July 1906, she handed to Hörner *a piece of paper – being nothing less than 'A written promise selling herself to the Devil'*.

From this point on, the evidence of 'demoniacal possession' that makes up the bulk of Hörner's document escalates steadily. Germana burst into furious rages and tore her clothing, gnashing her teeth and growling, barking and grunting. She disputed furiously with 'One Invisible' and spoke in a number of 'Voices', who complained of the 'Blessed Stole' pressing on them and 'Holy Water' burning them.

Germana was particularly disruptive in mass on 26 August, despite being guarded by sisters and the strongest of her fellow pupils. She would not sit or kneel, told her peers to refuse to confess or else lie in confession, insulted God *and then, during the Offertory, before the eyes of us all*, Hörner records, *she was raised up about four or five feet in the air. She floated towards the Presbytery and descended laughing behind the servers. Then she turned her back to the Altar and said, Ungikuleku mina – Adore me*. Hörner tells us that the mass ended with Germana declaiming *blasphemies that cannot be written down*.

All of this continued and intensified in the days that followed: at one point, Germana burst into flame and complained of suffering from burn wounds, although all that was found was *a big hole . . . burnt through her skirt*. The entire environs of St Michael's were affected: *dark, large frogs with staring eyes like live coals appear outside, diabolical laughter [is] heard in the distance, a mysterious mighty power banged on doors and roofs and slammed windows at night; Germana levitated ten feet in the air before her fellow pupils and was dramatically affected physically*. In Hörner's words: *Frightful things happened when her severest paroxysms came on. Her face would swell, then her chest, then her stomach, as if inflated. Her neck would become as long as a swan's neck, her eyes glowing like fire. She growled and gnashed, grunted, barked, made a low but loud continuous snarling, rolling noise, bellowing like a wild beast in the wilderness. Often all the noises were heard together, a diabolical concert of hell*.

Sometimes, something like a swollen vein appeared under her skin. It went over her whole body. You could see it start on the hand; running up the arm until it

appeared on the neck, it went up the cheek, across the forehead and down the other cheek, then down the leg and foot, torturing every limb it went through.

The priests and sisters at St Michael's finally wrote detailed reports to the Bishop of Durban. He was away in Europe, but the Episcopal Ordinary sent a letter giving full power for an open 'Solemn Exorcism' to Hörner. Priests from other stations came to assist and the exorcism was set for Wednesday, 12 September. It was held publicly, with all the priests, brothers and sisters from the station present, as well as *other Christians from outside*, including adults and some schoolchildren.

The rituals and procedures followed were those of *Titulus X* of the *Rituale Romanum*, the first edition of which was published under the papacy of Paul V in 1619. These come across as quite appropriate, as Germana displayed all three of the main indications of possession set out in the section 'Concerning the Exorcising of Possessing Demons': use of an unknown tongue; knowledge of hidden things; and physical power much above the expected.

The 'unknown tongue' in question underscores the fact that the possession at St Michael's remains throughout of the most conventionally Catholic and European kind. It is important to note that at no point is there an intrusion of or blending in of any other form of spirituality, local or regional. No mention is made in any of the accounts of the exorcism to the '*indiki* nuisance', for example, which spread throughout Zululand between 1894 and 1914, in which a number of young women declared themselves 'to be possessed by the ghost of a defunct person'.⁵ Invariably the possessing spirit in these high-profile cases was that of someone in the community, usually a relative, while the demons at St Michael's conform in every respect to the fallen angels or evil spirits satellite to Satan as customarily conceived within the history of the Catholic Church. This is extended to their linguistic manifestation; although the exorcism was largely conducted in isiZulu, the spirits consistently expressed themselves in European languages and extended a command of these languages to the possessed. Just before the exorcism, Hörner reports: *All of a sudden Germana began singing a jocose German song, Ach wennesnur immer so bliebe hier unter dem wechselndem Mond – Ob*

if only it would remain so here under the changing moon. After the first verse she added two more of her own composition, full of wit and humour – in perfect German. She only knew a few words of German that she had picked up from the Sisters and Brothers. But throughout all that followed she understood other languages too that she had never learned, Latin and Polish as well. Usually she answered correctly in Zulu; if urged authoritatively during the Exorcism, she spoke Latin.

Later Hörner adds: *It was obvious that she understood all the Latin prayers and Exorcism in the Roman Ritual. She answered correctly in Zulu all the questions put to her in Latin; she corrected defective pronunciation in Latin and other faults; she recited whole sentences in Latin, saying, I know all that you are reading in your book, I don't need any book.*

As for 'knowledge of hidden things', *the Devil in her was very indiscreet, says Hörner. He revealed what happened secretly, at different places, at different times, things Germana could not have known. He especially revealed sins not confessed, or concealed in confession. He told all these things in the presence of those concerned, to their horror. They then went to confession as soon as possible. Once the sins were confessed he did not refer to them again.*

Germana's exceptional physical powers were demonstrated again and again once the first exorcism was underway. From the first, Hörner reports, *Germana became more and more excited. She tried to run away. The Sisters and big Zulu girls seized her, put their arms around her shoulders, loins, and legs and forced her down on a chair. It was very difficult to keep her down. Handcuffs were put on, but they were of no use; nor was binding her arms and legs with ropes. She rose up again and again off the chair to stand free and upright.*

This was, as is to be expected, only the beginning and as the exorcism continued over its two full days, Germana's power grew. On the afternoon of the first day, Hörner tells us, *Germana tried to stand up; the Sisters pressed her down. A fierce struggle began. Three Sisters and six grown up girls were holding her arms and legs, and then all were raised up with the chair, their feet about one to one and a half feet above the ground. Germana's body would lift in whatever position she happened to be in, seated, lying, or standing, with the others hanging on as best they could.*

This image verging on the comic is quickly given its full sinister force. *Germana foamed with rage, says Hörner; she cursed, her face disfigured*

terribly, full of hatred and wrath. The priest went on with the Exorcism, In the name of the Most Blessed Trinity, in the name of Jesus Christ Crucified, Holy Mary, Mother of God Immaculate pray for us, St Michael pray for us. Germana raged furiously, and again and again, all were raised upwards, Sisters, girls, chair and all, now to a height of about two yards . . .

Germana's head and body were swollen, her eyes glowing with diabolical fire, and that deep low continuous snarling rolling noise began again, and then that howling voice of desperation, Woe, woe, woe. The children were sent away towards evening when things became unspeakable, a picture of Hell.

Roarings, risings, disfigurements and much else continued for the rest of the exorcism. *Everything seemed to be in motion*, writes Hörner, *and there was a tremendous uproar everywhere, in the presbytery and church and outside in the air, on the roof and above the roof too, as if armies were fighting in the air.*

Hörner and his assistant priests persisted and then, late on the second day, after another dramatic levitation, Germana suddenly sank down. *Those holding her left her*, says Hörner, *and, like a dying person she lay on the floor before the Altar steps . . . It was all over . . . The terrible noise was gone, all was calm and quiet.* Soon after, Germana returned to her *bright and innocent self* and Hörner reports that *all was quiet and peaceful everywhere in the Mission Station; the Evil One was gone.*

As a conclusion to a narrative, however, this is oddly inconclusive – certainly if one remains at the level of spectacle, where nothing nearly worth the drama involved has been revealed. It is for this reason that we must turn to the tropes that inform and govern the spectacle if we are to *read* it – to treat it, as it seems to demand of itself, as signifying something beyond itself.

For all its flaunting as display, the possession is anything but a straightforward manifestation of evil; its governing trope is one of occlusions and reversals. Most obviously, the possession operates as a mode of signification by means of a curious form of inversion in which all the religious tenets broken and rejected by the possessing spirit confirm the truth and authority of those tenets. To pick two examples: the 'Unseen One' regularly confirms the power of certain religious representations by demanding their removal, and at the very moment one of the voices

speaking through Germana questioned the existence of God – *Who is God? Where is God? Thou hast not seen God! How can you say there is a God?* – the voice itself responds: *Yes, there is a God, He is in Heaven and everywhere and I myself have seen Him.*

At the heart of Hörner's account of the exorcism too is a sermon of the most effective kind. Germana's extended description of the conditions from which her demons have emerged – *there is fire and darkness, and heat and cold in Hell. All hate and curse one another, for ever and ever. Woe! In a short time I must return to Hell. Jesus who is present in the Sacrament commands me. I hate Him, but I must obey. I cannot adore, we will not adore, woe, woe, woe* – makes exactly the kind of impression any priest would want: *tears were running down the cheeks of the weeping and howling Germana when she uttered these terrible words*, we are told; the audience was 'spellbound', *the children and the faithful trembled with fear* and Good Fr. Appolinaris said, *If it would be allowed to pity Satan, we could indeed, but he is obdurate, he hates God, he will not serve God or ask pardon. It is terrible. This Sermon of the Infernal Spirit I shall never forget.*

And yet for all this, the first exorcism remains strangely empty. This is because the constant emphasis on confession and revelation that drives the spectacle is not only governed by inversion, but also by reticence. From the very first, more is hinted at than is disclosed. When Germana initially insists that Hörner be called to hear her confession, she says, *now I will say all. Be quick, otherwise Satan will kill me.* When Hörner comes to her, however, the 'other voice' says, *what have I to do with you? . . . The most grave and serious crimes I have not told him yet. Germana looked at Fr. Erasmus fixedly and sharply, saying, Shall I tell this one? Dare I say it?*

This holding back becomes one of the structuring tropes of what follows. A kind of teasing is introduced – references to revelations that remain deferred, hints at secrets at the very heart of the events that will not be spelled out. Even the exposure of comparatively minor sins, as with the unconfessed sins of her peers mentioned above, is often used to emphasise darker intimations that are left hidden – or suppressed. Writing of himself in the third person, as he often does, Hörner records: *The priest often had to demand silence, commanding with his priestly power and*

authority, where after [the Devil] said, I am bound by the priest; if I were not, then I would tell you terrible things.

Germana's possession becomes a struggle in which speech and silence are used as weapons by both priest and demon. On the one hand, we are told: *When the priest commanded her, she ceased and was silent*, while on the other hand, we are told that when *Germana asked again and again for the prayers of all . . . that she might be delivered from the Evil One, the Unseen One interrupted her each time, saying, Be silent Germana, you belong to me. Be silent – keep your peace. Otherwise you shall see, Uzaubona, you shall see.*

It is this silencing that prepares us more than anything else for a sequel, on more momentous lines. *I – the writer, Hörner records, am afraid to write the second part. Anyhow in God's name I will try to give a true account.*

The truth of his account of the second exorcism is, however, of a different order from that of the first. Hörner was not to be, as he repeats so regularly in his account of the first exorcism out of a fondness for his own clever turn of phrase, an *Eye and EAR witness* of these events. Instead, he bases his claims for factual accuracy on his *unique opportunity, for 12 years more till 1920, to see and speak with hundreds and hundreds of eye and ear witnesses, Priests, Brothers, Sisters, Children, Adults, and Christians from outside etc.* The reason he is reliant on these witnesses is because he would not physically be present at St Michael's at the time of the second possession and exorcism.

When, in January 1907, Germana says again that the demon is announcing himself, Hörner decides *to go to Rome to see and speak with the Superiors of the Order.* He tells no one of his plans, leaving only a letter for the administrator of Mariannahill, the Right Revd Abbot E. Obrecht. This letter provoked great anger and Obrecht declared Hörner an apostate, *ipso facto*, with his flight (Roos 1983: 187).

Hörner nevertheless manages to make his way without passport or ecclesiastical letters to Rome. There, he writes, *I received a letter from Natal telling me what happened at St Michael's etc. after my departure and the outbreak of the Second Diabolical Possession. Added was a description of the most horrible occurrences and phenomena and a series of terrible sayings and revelations.*

The higher Authorities of the Order banded the letter to me unopened, Hörner reports, and he is clearly put out that it has not been read by those

authorities as part of the standard procedures of church censorship. *So I gave it [back] to them for perusal, he tells us, asking them what they thought about these things, especially the oft-repeated revelation, made openly and repeatedly by Germana before hundreds of people. They hesitated and said, Satan is a liar. That's all very well, I replied, but are the revelations true or not? I received no answer, he goes on, saying only that he was treated very kindly.*

This, according to other sources, is quite simply not true. In fact, Hörner was immediately taken to the Trappist Monastery Ad Catacombas and kept there like a prisoner. He was denied all contact with the Roman congregation and, in the words of Father Definitior Symphorian, 'any correspondence of the prisoner was watched over very carefully' (Roos 1983: 187).

Why was Hörner so insistent that the highest authorities of the order and the church see the account of the second possession? And why did those authorities as insistently refuse, along with reacting so firmly against Hörner?

It is highly unlikely that the letter to Hörner from Natal had been handed over to him unopened. It is far more likely that the 'higher authorities' of the order simply did not wish to become involved in its contents, a fact that brings us back to the missing heart of the exorcisms at St Michael's, the logic informing the silence at its core. The 'terrible things', which the demon is prevented by the priest from revealing in the first exorcism, move quickly to centre stage in the second. And with them comes at least one possible reading of the strange events at St Michael's, one informed by a complex web of religious politics.

Although a second girl, a close friend of Germana's named Monika Mdhledshe,⁶ also shows signs of being possessed, Germana remains at the centre of the 'mysterious occurrences' of the second possession and, for the purposes of this chapter, it is most useful to keep our focus upon her. The physical manifestations of the demons are very similar to those of the first and so there is no need to retrace them in detail. Hörner's account of them differs mainly in their increased intensity, an intensity created, one is left to suspect, by their source and motivation coming far closer to the surface this time.

For it is not the physical manifestations that concern Hörner in his account of the second possession as much as the revelations made through Germana. *She also began to speak about terrible things done by different people, he reports, but this time people in high positions; she told names of places, even a house in America and one in Rome – she gave towns, roads and streets, and the number of a certain house in a town in America. She revealed terrible things in German ‘aussagen’ daily for weeks and weeks, 2–3–4 times a day sometimes. She made these declarations openly before all the people. When commanded to be silent she cried indignantly, This is my time, and I must be allowed to publish these things!*

For all his stress upon the specificity of these details, however, Hörner never spells them out in his account written in 1932. And so another level of holding back, deferral and teasing is introduced, this time in the reporting of the possessions, rather than in the possessions themselves. Clearly it is assumed a certain audience would be able to fill in the information referred to in the report, but in one crucial instance Hörner goes beyond such hinting, identifying a certain individual overtly. Germana, he says, *raged furiously about the Right Rev. Abbot Edmund Obrecht, the Administrator Apostolic, calling him angrily and sarcastically, Edmundi lo, this Edmund. Let him come here this Edmundi lo, I have to tell him many things.*

This long litany she repeated daily when she was in terrible paroxysms from being tortured by the Evil One.

And so the figure behind the possessions at St Michael’s is finally moved to the fore. It is Abbot Obrecht that the demons are determined to expose and his presence at Mariannahill that they seek to exorcise through Germana.

We have noted that the monastery was something of an anomaly as a Trappist house. Its founder’s increasingly idiosyncratic interpretation of the Trappist Rule, especially as regards mission activity, gave rise to complaints from both within his community and the order as a whole. This led to a canonical visitation from the General Chapter of the Order in 1892, and Abbot Pfanner was censured for the way in which he had freely granted the dispensations from the Benedictine Rule and Trappist Observances necessary to allow his monks to take part in his expansionist missionary programme. After a period of fierce infighting that deeply

divided the Mariannahill community, he was suspended from his office as Abbot of Mariannahill in 1892 and resigned from the position in 1893. He withdrew to the mission at that time furthest removed from the mother house, and then set up his own mission which he named Emaus – ‘people despised’ – where he ostensibly lived a life of quiet retirement. There is good evidence, however, that in the seventeen years remaining before his death in 1909 he remained firmly involved in all issues involving the Trappists in southern Africa, especially those concerning its remaining a missionary institution.⁷

By February 1909, the General Chapter of the Trappists, after a number of failed attempts at finding an Abbott for Mariannahill who could resolve the contradiction between the ideals of contemplation and apostolic activity, issued a decree officially separating Mariannahill from the Reformed Cistercians (Brain 1982: 246). At the time of the events we are concerned with at St Michael’s, however, this was still by no means a settled matter.

The appointment of Abbot Edmund Obrecht of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky as administrator of Mariannahill in 1905 represented one of the last efforts of the order at restoring Mariannahill to the Trappist Observances. He was charged with investigating conditions in the monastery and on the missions and improving them to the point that a new Abbot could be chosen from within the community. Above all, he was to ensure that the missionary enterprise was curtailed and the commitment to contemplation revived.⁸

Abbot Obrecht was well known for his reintroducing of the strictest of Trappist discipline at Gethsemani during a troubled period in that house’s history. He began his religious life at La Grande Trappe itself (the monastery where the order was founded and from which it took its popular name) and then served in administrative posts in other abbeys before spending many years in the Roman headquarters of the Trappists. He had earned a reputation as an order-wide troubleshooter, and it was certainly in this capacity that he was appointed to Mariannahill.

He began by calling a halt to all building projects on the missions and forbidding any other programmes aimed at their consolidation or

expansion. This confirmed the widespread opinion that it was his intention to liquidate the missions as soon as he could, something that infuriated the monks on the missions – Hörner among them, it hardly needs to be added.

But aspects of Abbot Obrecht's personality ran counter to his reputation for strictness and discipline. He was infamous for betraying the confidentiality of his office, as well as for a rather worldly lifestyle. His rapid rise through the religious ranks was earned not only through his understanding of liturgy and canon law, but also by being a linguist, a cosmopolitan, a diplomat and a connoisseur of books and manuscripts. He had put Gethsemani firmly on the map of Catholicism in the United States by becoming the intimate friend of not only several of the most high-ranking prelates, but statesman too, and countless influential businessmen. His connoisseurship extended to cigars and whisky, and he became widely known for his skill at poker, especially when travelling about, as he often did.

We may assume that the 'terrible things' the demons revealed through Germana had much to do with these aspects of the administrator of Mariannhill. Certainly when Obrecht sent a representative to St Michael's to make a preliminary investigation, the demons were quite specific about their target. Hörner's sources report one outburst as follows: *It is not Germana who speaks and does these things, it is me, Satan! Have you any faculties and power? Who has sent you? The Bishop of Edmundi lo, this Edmund. O ye emissary of this Edmundi lo, why doesn't he come himself? I want him. I have to tell him things openly. Siyozana – we know one another. I know him from America, ha, ha, ha, ha. Get out and leave me, go back to Mariannhill and tell him, this Edmundi lo, what I told you. Now is our time, I am permitted by God – whom I hate – to publish these things.*

Then followed a Litany of frightful Publications, a kind of revelation – one she would repeat often throughout the terrible events to come.

Needless to say, comments Hörner, *the Administrator Abbot Edmund Obrecht did not come to St Michael's – now, or at any other time during the possession.* And it is at this point that a strange alliance between the demons and Hörner himself comes to the fore. *One evening a few days later, he reports,*

out of the blue Germana said, Just now the Baba – Fr. Erasmus – arrived in Rome. She named a street he was walking down, and the number of a house he turned into. She gave other particulars too, all of which I can verify as true. Then she said, another one will join him there, and they are doing good work. Then, speaking in a loud voice like a preacher she began to repeat the Terrible Sayings – first she spoke about many things concerning St Michael’s Mission, and of other places far away. She called persons by name, Natives and Europeans, and used the names of other places, saying the devils were working there also, but the priests did not know.

That the specific nature of these charges was beginning to take effect is borne out by a high level delegation of church authorities, led by Bishop Dr Delalle, who had recently replaced Jolivet as Bishop of the Natal diocese, arriving at St Michael’s to carry out the second exorcism.

This indicates how seriously the church took this case of reported possession. From the late 1890s onwards, the era of ‘Catholic intransigence’ was giving way to a tentative accommodation between church and state (Mantel 2004: 15), and even in the colonies – especially colonies as historically hostile to Catholics as those of southern Africa – the leaders of the church were anxious not to give any ammunition to liberals and free-thinkers, or allow themselves to be mocked by anti-clerical rationalists. The matter was also dangerously close to falling afoul of section 9 of *Zululand Proclamation No.11 of 1897*, the Witchcraft Ordinance. This law had been invoked in the case of the ‘*indiki* nuisance’ referred to on page 172 and had wide-ranging application within the colonial state’s determination to eradicate anything that even hinted at witchcraft. Caution was especially called for because, as Julie Parle stresses in *States of Mind*, ‘this law criminalised both those who were regarded as practising witchcraft *and* those who accused them of doing so’ (2007: 134; emphasis in original). Bishop Delalle was then following standard church practice sharpened by his colonial context when he wrote of the St Michael’s affair that at first he ‘was very much annoyed and hardly believed it was a case of possession, but rather put it down to hysterics’ (Delalle 1914: 125).

If we wonder of Germana, as Hilary Mantel does of Gemma Galgani: ‘[W]hat kind of language you can use to talk about her – through

which discipline will you approach her?' (2004: 3), that of hysteria comes quickly to mind. Certainly A.T. Bryant, the Catholic missionary and ethnographer who began his career in South Africa as a Trappist (leaving the order during the period when attempts were made to curtail its missionary work), relies heavily on popular European concepts of hysteria. In his 1911 publication, *Zulu Medicine and Medicine Men*, he states with great confidence: 'The Africans being a race of strong emotions, both sexually and sentimentally, we should almost expect hysteria to be rife amongst them'; he goes on to give this its standard gendered application by adding: 'Hysteria is very common among native girls' (1966: 70).

We should remember, however, that while the *fin de siècle* has long been considered the golden age of hysteria, the backlash against theories of hysteria had begun even before the death in 1893 of the figure most commonly associated with the identification of the condition before Sigmund Freud.

Jean Martin Charcot's work with patients at the hospital of La Salpêtrière in Paris may well have proved invaluable for the development of the theory of unconscious symptom-formation, but he also believed that his formulations of hysteria offered a scientific explanation for phenomena such as demonic possession states, witchcraft, exorcism and religious ecstasy. One of his most cherished projects was a retrospective diagnosis of hysteria as portrayed throughout the ages in works of art. With a disciple, Paul Richer, he published a collection of medieval artworks illustrating his thesis that religious experiences depicted in art could be explained as manifestations of hysteria. Charcot and his followers also entered into acrimonious public debates on contemporary mystical phenomena, including cases of stigmatics, apparitions and faith healing. Charcot was particularly concerned with the miraculous cures reportedly occurring in the newly established shrine at Lourdes, and his disciple Desire Bourneville used the recently formulated diagnostic criteria in an attempt to prove that a celebrated stigmatic of the time, a devout young woman named Louise Lateau, was actually a hysteric.

Increasingly, however, Charcot found himself called upon to defend the credibility of the public demonstrations of hysteria with which he

had enthralled Parisian society. It was widely rumoured that the performances were staged by suggestible women who, knowingly or not, followed a script dictated under hypnosis by their patron. At the end of his life, he apparently regretted opening up this area of investigation and by the end of the century, despite the publication of Freud and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* in 1895, the popular appeal of hysteria had dissipated (see Anderson 2006). Hörner was not then entirely out of step with contemporary opinion: *In spite of all the witnesses to these horrible and frightful occurrences, the rumour . . . was that it was all swindle and fraud, hysteria, delirium, folly, and tomfoolery. Well, many Doctors and Scientists and learned men of all types, if they cannot explain certain phenomena, say it is hysteria – although they cannot explain what hysteria really is or means. Then crowds of men, mentally inert, parrot the nonsense. Habeant sibi!*

Bishop Delalle wrote his own account of the exorcism in which he summarises very briefly the demonic behaviour as reported by the priests and sisters of St Michael's, but does not testify to witnessing it himself. His account is far more restrained: there is no chorus of hellish sounds, no diabolical physical transformations, no flights to the ceiling. Germana is only able to tell ordinary water from Holy, understand and speak some Latin, and has an unusually full grasp of Catholic metaphysics, including the fall of Lucifer, the creation of his demons and the nature of hell. She has some surprising knowledge of a few minor occurrences at St Michael's and is noisy and disruptive throughout, but little more. Crucially, his account includes nothing of the 'terrible sayings'. He states nevertheless: 'If anyone can explain the signs, the symptoms, the words, and the cure otherwise than by possession, he will be more clever than I am'; and ends with the words: 'I have in my possession a letter sent me by Germana afterwards in which she begs that I will pray for her death. She has seen too much and is afraid of life' (Delalle 1914: 130).

It is perhaps the chilling poignancy of this note that calls out to us for some understanding of what Germana went through at St Michael's.

In Hörner's version, the 'terrible sayings' remain central to the second exorcism, and the Bishop and his priests do everything possible to prevent these from being heard. This begins with the exclusion of all except the

three sisters and four assisting priests from the church. Hörner is clear as to why this is done: *When His Lordship had heard the details of the terrible facts of the possessed, he said: Nobody come in.* Germana will not, in his account, be denied her audience however: although *all the Native Christians had to remain outside*, writes Hörner, *they could hear the uproar and talking of Germana when she repeated the terrible sayings, for she cried loudly with a mighty voice like a preacher when she told these things.*

Whom these ‘terrible things’ concern is also made quite clear: Germana calls out again and again: *Where is this Edmundi lo, umgana wako, this Edmund your friend? Why doesn’t he come here? I have to tell him many things.* Sizazana – *we know one another.*

Then the Litany of the terrible things spoken in the First Possession was repeated again, pronounced with wrath and fury. All now present were dumbfounded and amazed. When the priest translated to the Bishop what Germana said, His Lordship commanded, Tace in nomine Domini Nostri Jesus Christ Crucified – be silent in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ Crucified.

To which she retorted, I will not obey; now is my time, granted by God, whom I hate. Even thou, oh Bishop, will prevail nothing against me, before you have done something of which you are conscious. I acknowledge your Episcopal power, but even you cannot drive me out before you have done something you know. Do you understand? Do it. I will not go out today. And the possessed repeated the same Terrible publications again.

Again, however, nowhere in Hörner’s account are the constant references to the ‘terrible sayings’, the ‘litany of frightful publications’, the ‘awful revelations’ at the heart of the mysterious occurrences ever given any specific content or substance. What could explain his refusal to spell out those issues towards which everything in the whole diabolical display is directed?

This question is especially difficult given that Hörner’s document was written in 1932, some 25 years after the events it details. Even if we assume that a written account of the events could not be risked earlier, why should the entire rationale of documenting it be left out at a later date?

A possible answer is that when Hörner’s attempts to get Rome to read the letter sent to him from St Michael’s just after his arrival – a

letter conveying the earliest and most immediate description of the exorcisms, including, I am sure, the most painstaking recitation of every item listed in the terrible facts of the possessed – were frustrated, the whole enterprise lost much of its force. Enough, anyway, not to have to risk, even two and a half decades later, bringing the authority of Abbot Obrecht – who had gone from strength to strength in the church – down again upon Mariannahill.

Hörner and those siding with him were forced to find another route for declaring their revelations. Shifting from the medieval to the most modern of mediums, it is in all probability they who were – in one way or another – behind an explosive article that appeared first in the *Bayrischer Kurier*, then in the *Augsberger Postzeitung*, and then in newspaper after newspaper throughout Germany, each of which copied it verbatim (see Roos 1961: 188–89, who refers to the letters, but does not report their contents). Here at last in plain print we have the ‘terrible things’ that could not be spoken outright by the possessed. Literally now a ‘litany of frightful publications’, the article barely pauses to inform its readers: ‘Since April 1905 Edmund Obrecht, Abbot of Gethsemani in America, has been appointed as Apostolic Administrator of the Missionary Monastery of Mariannahill’, before stating: ‘This man has all the characteristics of one who will not just fail to reform the monastery, but to deform it, and to bring it down in ruins’ (Anon. 1907).

The attack ranges from Obrecht’s hatred of Germans (Mariannahill was largely staffed by German-speakers) to his insulting attitude to his subordinates. ‘He lets the Lay Brothers starve,’ it goes on. ‘They have to work on just two ounces of bread under the burning African sun from two in the morning until midday, while he consumes six eggs for breakfast and drinks wine and whisky and three secretaries have to do the work for which he is employed’ (Anon. 1907).

Obrecht is accused of humiliating those under him, and imposing ‘punishments so exorbitant that those affected by them are pushed into suicide and apostasy’. He arrogantly dismisses all suggestions, especially to do with the missions: ‘In complete ignorance of the practical life of the missions,’ says the article, ‘he proceeds in such a way as to make sure

the missions suffer the greatest damage possible. Experienced missionaries cry tears at his orders.' Furthermore, he 'wastes the property of the monastery and the alms of the missions', travelling extensively and behaving 'like a lord and a millionaire'. The article openly charges this 'embodiment of egotism' with misappropriating funds (Anon. 1907).

'Finally,' say the writers of the article in a reference particularly stinging in an order that holds to the observance of silence, 'his phenomenal love of gossiping must be mentioned, which must be unsurpassed anywhere in the world. Each Father and Brother and Sister learns from him everything about everybody else. In the same way he pulls the monastery down into the dirt before strangers' (Anon. 1907).

But the accusations do not end there. Stating that 'there was not that much at Mariannahill to reform' other than a 'few human frailties' that 'could easily have been improved by a little Christian charity and an intelligent Superior', the article roundly declares that 'the current Administrator lacks both these qualities entirely. Where there are some real problems and fundamental difficulties, such as the relationship between the Trappist order and missionary work, the "reformer" does not even touch them with his small finger!' (Anon. 1907).

Obrecht's misuse of Mariannahill's missionary magazine for his own glorification (under the editorship of his nephew) is listed next, and the article climaxes with the assertion: 'This man, when in danger of being exposed, will not draw back from any means of covering himself. He especially loves to terrorise his inferiors, and therefore Rome itself will have to investigate him before we can learn the whole truth from the intimidated people under his heel' (Anon. 1907).

The article ends with the words: 'We stand for what is written down here not only with our word of honour, but also with our oath', but it is unsigned. No one ever came forward to claim its authorship in the flurry of correspondence that followed in all the newspapers that published it. Hörner did say that he had 'tried with all his power to prevent those articles from being published', but one of his closest associates quickly added, after also denying that he had written them, that 'the truth forbade him to contradict the facts described therein' (Roos 1961: 188).

The one thing that is certain is that the publicity Obrecht's irregularities received promised to blow the matter up very quickly into an order-wide debacle, with the scandal shifting from the scale of a few personal indiscretions to a querying of the practices of the order as a whole. In their embarrassment, the superiors of the order were only too happy to look for the quickest and easiest way out. And so it would appear that newsprint achieved what all the demons of St Michael's could not – Obrecht was encouraged to resign as soon as the opportunity presented itself (Roos 1961: 189).

Is such an explanation of the events at St Michael's yet another example of what Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport call the 'excessive tendency among modern historians to regard materialist motivation as the essential undercurrent of change' (1997: i)? Whatever degree of persuasiveness it does have is also extremely unsettling: did all that demoniacal violence tearing through the body and mouth of a young Zulu woman come down to the day-to-day infighting in the politics of a particular religious institution? What does such a potentially reductive account have to say about Germana's experience of these events? What investment could she have had in the politics so clearly inscribed into the exorcisms that would allow for paying so high a price to be the vehicle for their expression? Positioning her as the victim or dupe of Hörner's involvement in the leadership struggle at Mariannahill is clearly not nearly good enough and neither is treating the spiritual trauma she underwent as merely some kind of dressing up of the political.

Assigning the institutional power struggle only to the account Hörner gives of the possessions – as opposed to their actual occurrence, whatever form this really took – leaves us with many other avenues to explore, perhaps most obviously those of feminist historians on hysteria: sexual repression, passive resistance of a sort in a context that did not allow overt aggression, extreme physical expressions of the anger and assertiveness that colonial and colonised women were not allowed to demonstrate openly. Even the remarkably conventional Catholic expression adopted by the possessed of St Michael's becomes understandable to a degree if we follow Parle's reminder that 'crucially, [hysteria] is a mimetic disorder,

mimicking culturally acceptable expressions of distress'; 'those who are subject to feelings of anxiety, distress and conflict,' she writes, 'search for the cause of their dis-ease, ultimately finding answers within the dominant cultural paradigms of illness and healing, whether medical, spiritual or supernatural' (2007: 152).

It is doubtful that such explanations are any less 'material' in Elphick and Davenport's sense, however, in that they ultimately displace the spiritual dimensions of possession even more thoroughly than the reading I have attempted above. To come back to Mantel: 'You have to look the saints in the face,' she says, 'say how the facts of their lives revolt and frighten you, but when you have got over being satirical and atheistical, and saying how silly it all is, the only productive way is the one the psychologist Pierre Janet recommended, early in the 20th century: first, you must respect the beliefs that underlie the phenomena' (2004: 6).

As for the young Zulu woman at the centre of the events at St Michael's, Hörner tells us: *When it was over, with Satan gone and Germana liberated, she did not know any of all the terrible sayings and revelations either of the First or the Second Possession. She had much to suffer on account of these terrible sayings, of which she did not know anything afterwards, but she was humble again and asked for pardon and forgiveness, and was given permission to stay at St. Michael's . . . [S]he was obedient, honest, industrious, and thankful. In 1913 she caught a bad cold, and galloping consumption set in. On September 13th she passed away. R.I.P.*

And as for the voices of history, could there be a starker contrast between all that Hörner had to relate and the entry made by the historian who has collated the material on Mariannahill and its missions in the *South African Catholic Magazine*? His record for 1907 reads quite simply: 'No entries' (W. 1977: 128).

Notes

1. This document is the source of all the italicised passages in this chapter.
2. The relevant section from the *Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance* reads:

Apostolate of Monks

Fidelity to the monastic way of life is closely related to zeal for the Kingdom of God and for the salvation of the whole human race. Monks bear this apostolic concern in their hearts. It is the contemplative life itself that is their way of participating in the mission of Christ and his Church and of being part of the local church. This is why they cannot be called upon to render assistance in the various pastoral ministries or in any external activity, no matter how urgent the needs of the active apostolate.

3. This policy is set out at length in Bishop Ricards's book, *The Catholic Church and the Kafir* (1879).
4. See Brain (1975: 101–12), who concludes: 'For the Oblates St Michael's had been an unhappy mission from start to finish.'
5. As stated by the Norwegian missionary, the Revd Nils Astrup, in a letter to the Resident Commissioner, Zululand, in 1894. I quote this from Julie Parle's superb account of this phenomenon in *States of Mind* (2007: 133).
6. A whole new level of inquiry is introduced in Monika's written promise of selling herself to the devil; she burns this, but tells the sisters that she had written in it: *Satan, if you give me a new song for my mouth, then I will do anything you ask of me*. When the sisters respond that this could not be all she had written, Monika answers: *Only the song is still missing. The new song sounds out, 'Lucifer, if you can teach me all the languages of the world, then I shall be thine, body and soul.'*
7. Roos (1983) gives a highly detailed account of these events, which make up the bulk of *Between Two Ideals*.
8. A resolution formulated by the order at this time, largely in relation to the circumstances at Mariannahill, reads:
Our Order which is dedicated to the contemplative life, shall not accept any Mission or exterior activity in the actual sense of the word. But if circumstances demand this partly, these shall only be undertaken with the reservation that life in the community in a Monastery is observed regularly. It is not permitted to look for such exterior activity of one's own accord. The General Chapter will decide upon such cases where such activities should be taken up in part or permanently, and it will set its limits to them (Roos 1983: 156).

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