

Introduction

MICHAEL HUNTER*

One of the challenges for historical biographers is to decide how far it is appropriate or legitimate to try to psychoanalyse their subject. On the face of it, such analysis might seem an obvious part of the biographical enterprise in a twentieth-century context. We are all heirs to the revolution in thought brought about by Freud's discovery of the unconscious in the nineteenth century, since when it has become commonplace that beneath people's conscious thoughts and statements lie deeper, more fundamental drives and motives, of which they are not aware and which are not under their conscious control. Indeed, speculation about such subconscious desires and impulses is normal in day-to-day conversation: this reflects and is reflected by the fact that words that originated as technical, psychoanalytical terms have become part of the general language, such as 'neurotic', 'paranoid', or even 'death wish' and 'Oedipus complex'.

Yet if, on the face of it, it might seem only natural to deploy similar practices in the context of historical biography, many have felt inhibited from doing so, and for this there are various reasons. One is a sense that psychohistory has frequently been bad history, a feeling which has often been used to justify a rather Luddite approach to the enterprise. It is undoubtedly true that some examples of historical psychoanalysis have been open to criticism for their cavalier use of sources. Thus Freud's own investigations of this kind, both his study of Leonardo and his investigation of the case of the seventeenth-century painter Christoph Haizmann, have been criticized for inaccuracy and for making false deductions about the significance of evidence due to unfamiliarity with its context.¹ The same is true of perhaps the most famous of subsequent studies of this kind, Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1959), which has been accused of manipulating facts to fit theories.² Perhaps the most extreme statement of scepticism about psychohistory, fuelled by such shortcomings, was made by David Stannard in his *Shrinking History: on Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (1980). On the other hand, I felt I detected an echo of his attitude in the response of certain social constructionists to the current exercise when I

* Department of History, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX.

1 Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* and 'A neurosis of demonological possession in the seventeenth century', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (ed. and trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson), 24 vols., London, 1953–74, xi, 63–137, xix, 67–105. For criticism, see e.g. David Stannard, *Shrinking History: on Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory*, New York, 1980, 3–21, 28, and the references there cited; Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness*, London, 1987, 83–9.

2 E. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, London, 1959. For criticism, see e.g. Stannard, *op. cit.* (1), 22–4, and the references there cited. See also Thomas Flanagan, 'Problems of psychobiography', *Queen's Quarterly* (1982), 89, 596–610.

outlined it to them, who assured me that it was all a waste of time because the interpretation that we would end up with would be as capricious as the data we fed in. Yet insofar as such views have led to a rejection of the genre as a whole, this is surely a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Indeed, one is left with a strong suspicion that those who adopt such a position have done so for ulterior motives, of an either intellectualist or constructivist kind.

Such criticisms in any case return us to the dilemma outlined in my first paragraph: if no one denies the validity of the basic insights of psychiatry in everyday life, how can they be so irrelevant to history? In any case, such critiques fail to do justice to the extent to which a sensitive use of an overtly psychoanalytical approach has in fact sometimes worked in a historical context. A case in point, taken from the history of early modern science, is Robert Westman's account of Rheticus, whose unusually complete espousal of Copernicanism, by sixteenth-century standards, Westman links to his abnormal personality, including his father's execution when he was a child and his ambivalent relationship with other men.³ Similarly, the use of psychoanalysis by Lyndal Roper and other students of early modern witchcraft has undoubtedly made sense of aspects of witch beliefs which historians had previously found puzzling, even if some practitioners may have taken the approach too far.⁴

There is a further, perhaps more serious, objection to retrospective psychoanalysis, and this concerns the applicability of nineteenth- and twentieth-century models of human motivation and behaviour to people of earlier historical eras. If psychoanalysis is essentially the product of nineteenth-century Vienna, its preoccupations are likely to reflect the modern, bourgeois context in which it originated, and it is a matter of dispute whether they will be equally applicable to the very different mental conditions of the early modern period. This is a problem that has arisen in connection with certain psychoanalytical studies of early modern witchcraft, notably John Demos's *Entertaining Satan* (1982).⁵ Moreover, apart from the general dilemma that it presents, there is a more specific objection to the rather reductionist attitude to religion adopted by Freud and many of his followers: it might be felt that this would make it very difficult to understand the preoccupations of a culture as soaked in religion as that of early modern Europe, as Roy Porter has well observed.⁶ Indeed, Michael MacDonald has gone beyond this in arguing for the need to try to reconstruct the categories that contemporaries themselves used to describe and understand their mental state, not least through the use of narratives in which

3 R. S. Westman, 'The Melancthon circle, Rheticus, and the Wittenberg interpretation of the Copernican theory', *Isis* (1975), 66, 165–93.

4 Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe*, London, 1994. See also Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England*, Ithaca and London, 1995; Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, London, 1996.

5 John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, Oxford, 1982. Cf. Michael MacDonald, 'New England's inner demons', *Reviews in American History* (1983), 11, 321–5; D. D. Hall, 'Witchcraft and the limits of interpretation', *New England Quarterly* (1985), 58, 253–81, esp. 268f.

6 Porter, op. cit. (1), Chapter 5. See also Stephen Greenblatt, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance culture', in his *Learning to Curse*, New York, 1990, 131–45, and the critique of this in Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: the Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, London, 1996, 374–6.

the drama of despair and conversion were worked out.⁷ Though as yet little tried, this may well prove the most satisfactory way forward.

If, on the other hand, one does want to try to utilize the insights of modern psychoanalysis in a historical context, how is this best achieved? Here we come to the third and perhaps the greatest of the difficulties relating to this matter: the disconcerting variety of disparate schools in which contemporary psychoanalysts are ranged. Quite apart from Freudian, Jungian and Kleinian schools, there is also the contrast between interpretations stressing infantile experience as against those which lay greater emphasis on developments over the individual's life as a whole, in the form of lifespan developmental psychology.⁸ Though the current trend may be towards a greater or lesser degree of eclecticism, this arguably makes the problem more, rather than less, acute, since it tends to disguise real underlying differences of approach, hence making things more difficult than ever for the outsider.

It was in the course of discussing this dilemma with other scholars who have experienced similar problems that I devised the idea of confronting the issue in the manner implemented here, namely of choosing a single historical figure, and asking practitioners of different psychoanalytical schools to offer their own interpretations of him on the basis of a common body of material. The figure chosen for this was Robert Boyle (1627–91), perhaps the most influential British natural philosopher before Newton, who seemed appropriate for various reasons. He was obviously significant and influential, as recent research has underlined. In addition, we have a good deal of biographical material on him, some of it suggesting that he had a complex personality that would repay sensitive analysis. Indeed, I myself suggested in a paper published some years ago that he displayed 'dysfunctional' traits which might bear further investigation.⁹ More generally, the hope was that the exercise would enhance our understanding of the role of psychoanalysis in historical biography in broader terms, and suggest directions for future development. For this reason the topic was made the subject of a one-day Conference of the British Society for the History of Science, held at Birkbeck College, University of London, on 12 July 1997.

The conference was opened by a paper in which I gave a brief introduction to Boyle and his historiography, explaining why I felt he was a particularly suitable subject for the present exercise: this is printed here substantially as it was given at the conference. Then three psychotherapists, representing the principal current schools in British psychotherapy, gave papers in which they offered a psychoanalytical portrait of Robert Boyle. These were Brett Kahr, a Freudian; John Clay, a Jungian; and Karl Figlio, a Kleinian. Their theoretical orientation and its significance in this context are more fully explained in their papers. Each

⁷ Michael MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: narrative, identity and emotion in early modern England', *Journal of British Studies* (1992), 31, 32–61. See also his *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge, 1981.

⁸ See W. M. Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography*, Oxford, 1988; M. M. Sokal, 'Life span development psychology and the history of science', in *Beyond History of Science: Essays in Honor of Robert E. Schofield* (ed. Elizabeth Garber), Bethlehem, 1990, 67–80. I am grateful to both authors for their encouragement in the current exercise.

⁹ Michael Hunter, 'The conscience of Robert Boyle: functionalism, "dysfunctionalism", and the task of historical understanding' in *Renaissance and Revolution: Scholars, Craftsmen and Natural Philosophers in Early Modern Europe* (ed. J. V. Field and F. A. J. L. James), Cambridge, 1993, 147–59.

was provided with a uniform dossier of information about Boyle which I selected, the content of which is indicated at the end of my paper. The idea was that these items would provide the primary materials for their analysis, though of course this was not intended to preclude their looking at other sources on Boyle or his milieu, which in each case they did. It is perhaps worth adding that we consciously avoided a preliminary meeting to compare notes, in order not to detract from the interest of the different interpretations being juxtaposed at the conference itself. The idea was to illustrate the characteristics and potential of each of the different approaches that the speakers represented, and the revised versions of the papers presented here do just this.

At the meeting, the presentation of each of the papers was followed by lively discussion, while a round-table session at the end of the day gave rise to a lengthy and fruitful discussion of the insights that had been gained both into Boyle, and into the enterprise of historical psychoanalysis more generally. This exchange was notable for its openness, and perhaps particularly for the mutual respect that it transpired existed between the psychoanalysts involved and the historians present. Historians tend to be bad at taking themselves seriously, yet it is clear that, whatever the insights to be derived from the application of psychoanalytical theory, as much is to be achieved by the sensitivity to sources and context by which historians are characterized. In an attempt to preserve a record of these discussions and to build on them, Geoffrey Cantor, who was present at the meeting and who wrote a brief report on it for the *Newsletter* of the British Society for the History of Science, agreed to elaborate on this by writing a full-length paper.¹⁰ This concludes the present special issue, and in it Cantor reflects at greater length on the papers in their written form, and on the overall enterprise to which they are devoted.

In all, the exercise has proved profoundly illuminating. Certainly, I have been stimulated by it to think afresh both about Boyle and about the best way forward in studies of this kind. Indeed, in some ways I see the publication of the current group of papers less as a culmination in itself than as a stimulus to further reflection and research. I hope one day to write a full-length biography of Boyle which will undoubtedly benefit from the insights that have emerged here.¹¹ It is hoped that others will think more deeply about the enterprise of historical psychoanalysis, perhaps (as Cantor suggests) by extending similar approaches to other figures and attempting a comparison between them, if not (as Figlio urges) by probing at the nature of the scientific mentality more generally. Either way, this exercise will have been fully justified in extending our understanding of the mutual relations of psychoanalysis and historical biography.

¹⁰ *BSHS Newsletter* (October 1997), no. 54, 24–7. I would like to record my special thanks to Geoffrey Cantor for his help, as also to the other contributors. Financial assistance towards the cost of the conference was generously made by the Royal Society and The Foundation for Intellectual History.

¹¹ See also the Introduction to M. Hunter, *Robert Boyle: Scrupulosity and Science*, Woodbridge, forthcoming.