

## From illusion to disenchantment: Feijoo versus the 'falsely possessed' in eighteenth-century Spain<sup>1</sup>

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I conclude from the findings that there were no witches nor bedevilled people in those places until they began to write about them. (Alonso de Salazar y Frías)<sup>2</sup>

I prove the matter through the constant experience that on very rare occasions does there appear to be any possessed person in places where no one starts exorcizing. (Benito Jerónimo Feijoo)<sup>3</sup>

Among the many attacks that the Benedictine Father Benito Feijoo (1676–1764) launched against the so-called *vulgo* (the 'common herd'), one of the most impassioned was undoubtedly that dedicated to those possessed by the Devil. Presenting himself as an expositor of false beliefs, for whom Spanish society at the time was crying out, Feijoo warned his contemporaries about the great number of falsely possessed wandering around the country. From his perspective, the proliferation of fake possessed people constituted one of the most serious deceptions, and also one of the most widely accepted by the masses. For this reason in his general encyclopaedic work, written 'to correct general misconceptions', the essay 'Demoniacos' was a key work that historians have identified as representative of the beginning of the Spanish Enlightenment movement.<sup>4</sup>

Before embarking fully on the main discussion, we find ourselves facing two significant lines of thought as much about the author himself as the public at whom the discourse was aimed. Feijoo considered himself a misunderstood benefactor: 'experience and discourse have taught me that the person who reveals truth not only falls out with the deceiver but also with the deceived'.<sup>5</sup> He took for granted that the majority of those who read his writings, in other words the *vulgo*, among whom he includes 'a great many indiscreet priests', would be against his thesis. Not for nothing are the so-called *vulgo* depicted by the Benedictine as comprising a class of people mentally rather than socially defined, who did not use their intelligence, who rejected reflection, and guided by emotion ended up behaving like madmen.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this, the author quixotically presented his revelations to

these very people.<sup>7</sup> In this way, from the very outset of his discourse, he considered the battle as being between two conflicting forces: the light of reason versus the twilight of superstition, or rather the common good against the personal interests of certain individuals who capitalised on the excessive gullibility of the majority.

Much has been written about the attitude of Feijoo towards the things that he so vehemently complained about.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand his freedom to criticise scholastic dogmatism, together with his experimental methods, placed him at the heart of the enlightenment sweeping Europe at that time. On the other hand, his unshakeable orthodox Catholicism, which led him to accept Revelations as an essential part of knowledge, roots him deeply in the very world he attempted to dismantle.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, what is significant right at the beginning of his essay on possession is the curious statistical estimate he puts forward concerning the number of possessed people who might be considered genuine. In a characteristic resort to a compromise solution, which places him constantly between two eras,<sup>10</sup> Feijoo affirmed:

The Vulgo ... nearly always believe to be truly possessed whoever appears so. Men of greater wisdom recognise that many are false but remain convinced that the genuine ones are not few in number. My feeling is that the number of the latter is so limited that, generally speaking, out of 500 who claim to be possessed 20 or 30 really are so.<sup>11</sup>

So the Benedictine thought that approximately 96 per cent of those who claimed they were possessed either feigned possession, or were ignorant and mistaken (imagined possession). Yet before spending time decrying the former and dealing with the latter, Feijoo felt obliged to justify the other 4 per cent, which constituted his concession to the concept of authority which he so often brought into question.<sup>12</sup> Despite confessing that he personally had never known a true case of possession, he put forward three reasons in favour of the existence of genuinely possessed people: their presence in the gospels and in the lives of some saints, the exorcisms approved by the Church, and the testimony of some trustworthy individuals. Having established these premises, and wishing to forestall any potential objection, Feijoo pondered on why there were so many genuinely possessed in the time of Jesus Christ and so few in his time. 'It could', he said, 'be argued to the contrary that in the time when Christ ... was on the earth, there were many (possessed), as can be seen from the four gospel writers ... so it needs some thought as to whether there are now too.'<sup>13</sup> His response was to refer to the will of God, a naive, facile answer on the surface. However, if anything is striking in the Benedictine's attitude, it is his lack of innocence, his extraordinary erudition, reading and reflection,<sup>14</sup> and in spite of everything, his dogged insistence on defending the most refined orthodoxy. Feijoo was no stranger to those who advocated a new biblical exegesis. It had developed in Europe by the end of

the seventeenth century under the influence of the Cartesian methodological doubt and the discoveries of explorers and missionaries. In an age in which the notion of the diversity of the world started to spread, essays favouring the acceptance of alternative interpretations of Scripture multiplied daily.<sup>15</sup> Among these it is worth mentioning two that Feijoo knew at first hand. One was the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* by Robert Bayle,<sup>16</sup> and the other was the monumental *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament* by the Benedictine Augustin Calmet.<sup>17</sup> These kinds of critical works, with their arsenal of reasoned objection to facts contained in the Bible were borne in mind by Feijoo, to the extent of making him wonder whether the possessed quoted in the gospels, 'were not really possessed, if they were not merely suffering from varying illnesses; [although] the evangelists called them possessed, in accordance with the common parlance of the day'.<sup>18</sup> However, despite the progressiveness of his lexicological approach, Feijoo took a step back and, as on so many other occasions, he opted for a completely literal interpretation, arguing only on the basis of the repeated mentions in the gospels of 'expressions about the Devil speaking; the Devil coming back in; the devils said such and such a thing etc.'. <sup>19</sup> His final proposal, in the propagandist style so favoured by the Counter-Reformation, is that perhaps God allowed there to be more possessed people at the beginning of our times in order to highlight the role of Christ as the Saviour and Redeemer of humanity. He applies the same reasoning to the saints needing spectacular miracles in order to prove their sainthood:

It was extremely important that God should allow unearthly spirits to enter human bodies. It was necessary to repeat the miracle of exorcising them, characteristic work of the Redeemer, more than other types of miracles ... The same argument can be levelled at those opposing the saints whose virtue God wished to demonstrate in this way.<sup>20</sup>

Having acknowledged the slight possibility of real possession by the Devil, Feijoo threw himself wholeheartedly into his real objective: to expose the falseness of the majority of the possessed. His Manichaestic zeal in separating true from false was not at all new. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many essayists struggled to differentiate true from false astrologers,<sup>21</sup> authentic alchemists from impostors,<sup>22</sup> and even the genuinely poor from the pretenders and the vagabonds,<sup>23</sup> to name just some examples. When Feijoo wrote his treatise on the falsely possessed, a significant work was being disseminated with the express approval of the Benedictine: *El mundo engañado por los falsos médicos The world deceived by false doctors*. It was a 1729 Spanish version of a work by Giussepe Gazola, a doctor from Verona.<sup>24</sup> The author of the translation was none other than the very learned Gregorio Mayans y Siscar with whom Feijoo had started a correspondence in 1728.<sup>25</sup> In one of his letters, Mayans encouraged the cleric to carry on his work of

‘telling the truth to the world, above all in Spain ... without interrupting his most enlightened works, however much the crowds of inopportune idiots may protest’.<sup>26</sup> Feijoo himself wrote to Mayans some months after the publication of *El mundo engañado*: ‘I think it is wonderful and the translation is superb’.<sup>27</sup>

This book, praised by Feijoo so enthusiastically, emphasised over and over the need for reason and experience in the search for truth, and likewise the rejection of any principle of authority. The thoughts proclaimed by the Benedictine in his personal struggle were the same. Nonetheless, without detracting from his critical ability, one can say that as a staunch believer, Feijoo applied reason in a limited way and somewhat arbitrarily. Consequently, his unceasing endeavours against what he considered to be superstition lack logical congruity in the strict sense. Conversely, his way of tackling the concept of experience (with that militant empiricism which led him to involve himself personally in several cases of possession) adds a first-class anthropological interest to his work. Both aspects – reason and experience – appear inextricably linked throughout his exposé. Within the complex of impassioned writing the Devil plays a major role as one might expect. Taking as his guide ‘both the caution necessary to proceed in this area, and the importance of examining everything with the most attentive reflection’,<sup>28</sup> Feijoo decided to centre his discourse around ‘the chapters indicated by the Roman ritual’.<sup>29</sup> The so-called *Rituale Romanum* published in 1614 by Pope Paul V to do away with the enormous variety of criteria which had been used for exorcism throughout the Middle Ages, was considered by the Church as the only recognised authority on all matters relating to possession by the Devil.<sup>30</sup> The manual contained three fundamental norms for the recognition of possession by the Devil: speaking or understanding a hitherto unknown tongue; revelation of hidden or remote facts; and finally, demonstrating supernatural powers, although other indications could be taken into consideration at any time.<sup>31</sup>

The signs of possession examined in the *Rituale Romanum* allowed Feijoo to parade his powers of detection regarding the many impostors who passed themselves off as possessed in his own time. Without in any way attacking the doctrinal premises which admitted the possibility of the signs, Feijoo strives to knock down, one by one, each one of the characteristic signs of possession. The best known and most controversial of all of them was the speaking in Latin,<sup>32</sup> or the discussion of philosophy without ever having studied it. This belief, well known since the Middle Ages, was associated directly with the melancholic temperament and frenetic states induced by black bile. In 1575, Doctor Juan Huarte de San Juan not only acknowledged the link of such extraordinary capabilities with melancholic illness, but he even went so far as to say that ‘speaking frenetically in Latin, without having learnt it in health, demonstrates the harmony induced by Latin to the rational soul’.<sup>33</sup> This possibility was contested, however, by

other doctors, such as the Andalousian doctor, Andrés Velásquez, who in 1585 adamantly declared:

I hold it impossible in good philosophy (although in his *Examen de Ingenuos*, Doctor San Juan uses more paper to prove cases in order to prove his opinion) that any melancholic person can speak Latin, without knowing it, nor philosophise having never learnt how to do so. Because leaving aside authorities which we could bring in from both sides, reason tells us and confirms as true what I am saying.<sup>34</sup>

Outside of sickness, however, demonic intervention continued to be used to justify any exception: 'And if the frenzied or maniacs start speaking Latin, and philosophise without having hitherto learned how, it is the work of the Devil. And this is the cause to which it is attributable. For God allows this, and upon entering the body of these people, they begin to say the things that others marvel at.'<sup>35</sup>

Following the line of this tradition of thought, Feijoo did not deny that there were people possessed by the Devil who could speak Latin or hold forth learnedly without having previously studied. Indeed, he stated pragmatically that to be genuinely possessed they ought to express themselves in correct, fluent Latin. This fact, he said, was one which 'exorcists continually lose sight of, for when they hear one word or two by someone who has not studied Latin, they confidently pronounce the person to be possessed'.<sup>36</sup> According to Feijoo, one of the excuses which many exorcists invented was that the tongue of the rustic was an inadequate organ for the Devil to articulate Latin perfectly. For the Benedictine this explanation was utter nonsense: 'how stupid! The tongue of the rustic is in every way the same as Cicero's, Virgil's, or Tito Livio's'.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, his next argument, purportedly rational and sensible, turns out to be even more astonishing:

The Devil can speak perfect Latin, not only with the tongue of any man, but even with one belonging to a beast, just as he used to speak in the days of our forefathers, with a serpent's tongue. And what is more, not just with a beasts tongue. With the leaves of a tree, with the twigs of a tree trunk when he engages with them so that the movements and undulations they make fall upon the ear and seem like Latin clauses; he can produce the same sensation with the very air, moving it as he knows how, without any other instrument.<sup>38</sup>

The acceptance that the Devil could speak in Latin through the medium of animals, vegetation or the ether itself, was no more than an acknowledgement of the official ecclesiastic doctrine, according to which Satan's powers were practically limitless. With the exception of his inability to create something from nothing, it was supposed that with God's permission, anything, however astonishing, was accessible to the knowledge and cunning of the Devil.<sup>39</sup> Yet only in the Benedictine's reasoning did that wise and near omnipotent Devil

appear. In his personal experience, through dealing with those claiming to be possessed, Satan was completely absent and supposedly satanic signs were deliberate falsehoods.

One of the most paradigmatic types of investigation carried out by the monk was his experimentation with a certain woman from Oviedo who was supposedly bedevilled. Convinced of the trickery behind this, he used the comparative example of the sixteenth-century French case of Marthe Brossier. Brossier was a weaver's daughter from Romorantin, who in 1598 exhibited signs of possession and was taken to Paris by her father in the hope of obtaining a cure. She became a sensation in those towns, like Angers and Orléans, where they stopped on their way. On several occasions she was caught out in her deception when lines from Virgil were read to her as if it were a real exorcism. She was fooled by other such tests. She responded wildly when she was doused with what she was told was holy water, and responded similarly when they made her drink ordinary water saying it had been blessed.<sup>40</sup> Feijoo decided to expose the Oviedo woman in a similar fashion:

In this town of Oviedo there was a poor woman who took on the role of the possessed. They said she spoke Latin when she wanted to, that she knew what was happening throughout the world, that she flew over the tallest treetops. I, comparing cases, reached the conclusion that she was one of the many liars who feign possession by the Devil and once ... I made the priest who was exorcising her bring her to me.<sup>41</sup>

It is then that Feijoo responded by countering a deception with another deception:

Under the guise of consoling and inspiring in her the strong hope of a cure, I let her know at the outset that I ... knew much better ways of exorcising than the other priests were using, which the woman believed readily ... I began then my own rituals which were made up of lines from Virgil, Ovid, Claudiano and other poets, just as the Bishop of Angers had done with Marthe Brossier. All these were delivered with ponderous gestures and a strong voice in order to make an impression, which, in fact they did, for my spellbound lady exceeded herself, imitating with increased strength her fury with wild and extravagant gestures.<sup>42</sup>

As proof that the woman was faking, Feijoo singled out her blatant ignorance of Latin: 'She obeyed all that I said to her, since I did so in Spanish, but when I commanded her in Latin (in which I avoided formulae and common words that the falsely possessed know) the Devil turned deaf.'<sup>43</sup> Finally, to establish the falsity beyond all shadow of doubt, the Benedictine availed himself of the trick of the false relic: 'I applied to her a desk key wrapped in paper, as if it were a real relic', before which the supposedly possessed woman shivered and desperately beat against the walls and floor. Feijoo noticed that she did all

this without hurting herself, and being 'entirely convinced of the fraud', he dismissed her.<sup>44</sup>

This was not the only case where Feijoo took an active part in his findings on the controversial object of his discourse. Having focused on the first sign in the *Rituale*, the ability to speak an unknown language, the Benedictine continued to pour forth his warnings concerning other supposedly genuine signs. He warned his readers, using examples from first-hand experience, about the many nonsensical things that passed for miracles. His experimental, open attitude lead him to deal, for example, with 'a mad nun' who claimed to know what was happening in distant lands.<sup>45</sup> He even practised the art of the ventriloquist, giving his voice distant intonations and changing it so that it appeared to come from different speakers – symptoms that were often interpreted as dialogues with devils:

But already some astute physicians have discovered the artifice which consists of articulating words while inhaling; that is at the same time as air is drawn into the lungs ... I tried to see if I could copy it and with great control and effort I managed it not very well; but it meant a troublesome pain in my chest which lasted some hours.<sup>46</sup>

Without actually denying any of the portents attributed to the possessed, Feijoo restated over and over his incredulity based on his own experience:

That business of flying from the street or the pavement to the vault, of placing oneself on tree tops, walking on corn without bending the stalks is said about many bedevilled people when they are spoken of in distant lands. I have seen nothing of the kind to date.<sup>47</sup>

In his meticulous revision of certain supposedly extraordinary gifts which were commonly claimed to be symptoms of diabolic possession, Feijoo included a wide variety of examples, from the case of some blind people who were said to be able to behave as if they were sighted, to those gifted in imitating birdsong to perfection.<sup>48</sup> This last skill was recognised as a sign of genuine possession by Father Benito Remigio Noydens, the author of the most widespread book of exorcisms in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spain.<sup>49</sup> However, it was an easy task for Feijoo to expose such impersonators, and he outlined his findings for the benefit of those exorcists who encountered those 'who know how and with what instrument to do so':<sup>50</sup>

Let the exorcist when he comes across one of these people, make him clean out his mouth and spit out all its contents, and he will see, unless it is the devil he spits out, no longer can he imitate birdsong. It is true there are exorcists who are so fanciful that seeing them spit out a bit of leek or cabbage leaf, or some herb or other ... will swear that it is the Devil transformed into what came out of the mouth.<sup>51</sup>

These and other investigations confirmed the monk in his scepticism

regarding the vast majority of supposed diabolical interventions. From the tone of his work, the reader is tempted to think that Feijoo, sooner or later, is going to deny the existence of the Devil. After dismissing the supposedly possessed woman from Oviedo, for example, and attacking the persistent credulity of those who continued to defend her as possessed by Satan, Feijoo proclaimed: 'Why should the Devil be interested in tricking me? He knows only too well, *if there is such a Devil*, that I don't need to pursue him ... *since I am convinced that there is no Devil save that of the lies of that woman*, I would kick her out *and leave the Devil alone*.' <sup>52</sup>

The Devil, who, the Benedictine referred to sarcastically on numerous occasions,<sup>53</sup> was used more as a metaphor than a threat. In fact, Feijoo manages to dispense with him in each and every one of his arguments against devils, who, in his opinion, are merely tall stories. In this regard, his flat denial of the association between devils and stinking smokes is significant: 'such smokes are said to be effective in curiously disturbing the devils and during that disturbance reveal them and chase them away'.<sup>54</sup> Feijoo tells how in his day it was still common practice among many exorcists to burn substances like rue, St John's wort, goat's horn, and even human excrement, to torment and expel evil spirits with the stench: 'this effect happens, they claim, as a result of the vile and stinking smoke; for the Devil, who is extremely proud, suffers the cruellest torture seeing himself ruined and scorned by such incense shakers'.<sup>55</sup> However, no Devil is necessary, according to Feijoo, to explain the effects of such experiments: 'Any man or woman, if they get disgusting and fetid smoke up their nostrils will be moved, will worry, will struggle and do all they can to move away. Why should it be necessary to resort to the possessive Devil?' <sup>56</sup> That is the question, which in terms of pure logic, Feijoo himself might ask. But to doubt the real existence of the Devil would mean doubting the basic tenets of a faith, which in the monk's case, allowed no cracks whatsoever. Feijoo resolved his contradictions by defending a Devil so powerful and so negatively shaped by nature that he has no need even to appear:

The Devil, being pure spirit, has no need of any mechanism in the body in order to enter and work within it, nor is there any way which may facilitate or hinder his entrance ... therefore, if he wishes to be there, he will, even if he were incensed by eight hundred carts of St John's wort and rue. He could also get rid of the smoke of the plants and the goat's horn etc. from the nostrils of the patient and direct them to those of the exorcists.<sup>57</sup>

What we must not forget is that despite his incursions into the field of demonology,<sup>58</sup> what Feijoo maintained throughout his discourse was not a theological question, but a social problem that worried him greatly. From his point of view, all those falsely possessed people, whose ruses he was trying to expose, represented a grave danger to the common good. This was, in the



first instance, because of their very parasitical and passive indolence. He described them as 'lazy, vagabond types who waste some priests' time, usurp alms and abuse them and terrorise householders and neighbours'.<sup>59</sup> But even more so, he was critical of the excessive liberty and vengeful behaviour that such impostors enjoyed with impunity due to their possessed state. In a sense, they were protected by the spirits that controlled them, and were therefore not responsible for their acts:

The deception in this matter is very serious ... Just consider that a falsely possessed person ... is a person who, with no risk to himself, enjoys total freedom to commit as many crimes as he feels like. He can kill, take away honour, steal, burn down villages and cornfields; in fact launch himself into whatever violence he fancies. He knows no one can touch a hair of his head because all is cloaked with the imagination that the Devil did it all ... Could there be a more pernicious kind of person in the world? <sup>60</sup>

In fact, Feijoo implicitly answers this question himself. Despite his heavy tirades against those who paraded as possessed, Feijoo reserved his most ferocious attacks for those he called 'vulgar exorcists', whom he considers to be those truly responsible for the abuses he reported. It was those same priests, he stated, who encouraged the belief in possession by the Devil. They were guided by vanity and greed, for during the middle of the eighteenth century the spectacle of exorcism still pulled in the crowds:

The exorcists themselves ... are often the perpetrators of these and other tricks. Some minor clerics who have nothing else to boast of save their exorcising skills ... Nearly all those who are involved in exorcism are mainly interested in convincing others that they are exorcising the truly possessed. This makes their office seem extremely important to the public. It also renders it more respectable and possibly more lucrative. Should it be the case that greed is not a motive, then vanity surely is.<sup>61</sup>

Once again, we are dealing with a differentiation between the good and the bad, in this case among the ministers of the Church, since according to the Benedictine, such exorcists were merely those who lacked the gifts that would make them loved and respected by the people.<sup>62</sup> It was noteworthy, he observed, 'that very rarely indeed (I never saw it myself) is it the case that among anyone, either priest or layman, respected in the villages for his virtue and knowledge should dedicate himself to exorcism'.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, alongside these clerics who in his eyes were despicable, Feijoo also addressed himself to all those ignorant doctors who, when faced with illnesses they could not diagnose, hid their incompetence behind the easy alternative of possession by the Devil:

Unusual illnesses scarcely ever get taken for anything other than witchcraft or possession. The biggest blame for this lies generally with ignorant doctors, who, when they come across symptoms they have not met in the few books

they have read, and failing to find the cause or the cure, blame the Devil, and call upon the Church to assist them.<sup>64</sup>

As was indicated at the beginning of the chapter, Feijoo acknowledged three kinds of possession: genuine, feigned and imaginary. Despite the fact that the bulk of his essay was aimed at combating the second kind – ‘to tell the truth about common misconceptions’, as the title of the general work that contained the essay was called, the part which dealt with what he described as ‘imaginary’ possession is particularly interesting. Here we find what can be considered as the existing medical interpretation concerning the phenomenon of possession at that time. According to the Benedictine, whether out of ignorance or by mistake, certain illnesses were often mistaken for possession. Among them, there were three in particular: hysteria, melancholy and epilepsy. In fact the root of the connection of these ailments with diabolic possession dates back to classical antiquity, though the link was maintained right up to the ‘Age of Reason’.<sup>65</sup>

One of the myths associated with this pathological vision of possession was the higher incidence of these illnesses in women. According to Feijoo, ‘in the uterus of woman there is undoubtedly hidden the core of illnesses’.<sup>66</sup> However, once again, the Benedictine tries to take a step beyond tradition, and in an effort to rationalise the fact that in the gospels there are more male possessed, he queried:

I shall set you a problem which will tax you greatly. In the gospels there are more male than female possessed persons. I have studied this in depth. How then is it that nowadays everywhere there are more female possessed persons than male, so much so that for every possessed of our gender there are a hundred of the opposite sex?<sup>67</sup>

In answering it, he adopted a stance as ingenious as it was original. His response was obviously directed towards a primarily male readership, and had to exclude any diabolical intervention. For the Benedictine there was no basis in the consistent belief that the Devil penetrated women more easily because of their nature. This was not because there was no Devil though, but because, ‘For the Devil there is no ... temperament or physical disposition which may or may not allow his entry. If he finds not the slightest difficulty in penetrating marble and bronze, why should he not do so with the flesh, bones, nerves, membranes and hearts of the most robust man?’<sup>68</sup> The solution to the problem, then, was rooted not in a misogyny based on the female physiology, but rather on a psychology which attributed to them all sorts of weaknesses. For a while Feijoo seems to deny this accusation in a gesture of modernity,<sup>69</sup> but a little further on we see how he embraces it entirely, even taking it for granted that women were, ‘weaker-brained and of more vivid imagination, attributes which make it easier for them to believe they are possessed. This was seen already in two convents ... What could that be

blamed on if not the weakness of the brain, fertility of imagination and a lesser spirit?'<sup>70</sup>

Despite these findings, however, Feijoo, in a pseudo-sociological consideration of the reasons for the predominance of women amongst the possessed, concluded triumphantly that if there were more male possessed than females in Christ's time, it is because they were genuinely possessed. On the other hand, in his day, where the majority of the possessed were fakes, the predominance of women was due to the advantages to be gained from feigning possession, given their dependent state and lack of freedom:

The real solution to the problem is that the possessed whom Christ cured were really just that ... Women, usually, are more interested in fiction than men because their freedom to wander is so much more limited. This they greatly yearn for and the only recourse they have to achieve it is through feigning possession. Indeed, the falsely possessed women achieve this well, not only because with the excuse of seeking cures at different shrines and from different exorcists do they roam the land, but much more than that, because they can leave their house at any time and go anywhere. They are immune because the Devil leads them against their will.<sup>71</sup>

Although completely removed from our present-day sensibilities, it could be said that these findings contained some of the keys to the complex phenomenon of possession by the Devil, which rather than a deliberate deceit, as Feijoo appeared to maintain throughout his work, carried on being an effective mechanism for liberation, whether on an individual basis or collectively. Still in the midst of the eighteenth century, possession, which can be understood as a special language,<sup>72</sup> allowed an escape from an unbearable set of responsibilities and frustrations that built up in women who found themselves in an oppressive milieu. Calling themselves possessed by the Devil meant a unique opportunity for them to escape their many responsibilities, cut loose and allow themselves otherwise unavailable freedoms.<sup>73</sup>

To be effective the language of possession had to imply certain communal agreements, more so than individually preconceived arguments aimed at serving specific interests. Only in this way could the attitudes of the family and neighbours of the possessed, who continued to accept the imaginary struggle with invading demons, be understood.<sup>74</sup> The easy contagion between various bedevilled persons to which Feijoo alluded in his discourse, along with the characteristic gestures of possession, were only signs of this shared language:

A woman ... without being spellbound or having any Devil in her body, and also without wishing to pretend, will start to make the same gestures, emit the same shouts, show the same terror, move with the same twists and turns as she has witnessed in other possessed people. Why? Because her rough and ready way of conceiving things make her think that being possessed and

being exorcised she ought to do the same things as the others do in those circumstances.<sup>75</sup>

The understanding of possession as a language or cultural expression typical of popular culture would take many years to appear.<sup>76</sup> In the middle of the eighteenth century, Feijoo's worth did not stem from his scientific knowledge or his cogent arguments, nor even his unstinting fight against what he considered to be superstition, but in his open and experimental approach to new kinds of understanding. His stance as a believer who allowed himself to doubt and call into question the myths of his time, his 'moderate scepticism'<sup>77</sup> as he termed it, situates his work in a line of humanist thinking deeply rooted in Spanish culture. Just as the scepticism of the Grand Inquisitor, Alonso de Salazar y Frías had led him to believe in 1612 that there were no witches in Navarre or the Basque Country until people began dealing with them,<sup>78</sup> almost a century and a half later Feijoo would state with total conviction: 'There do not appear to be any possessed people except where there are gullible people who say there are.'<sup>79</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Translated by Mary O'Sullivan. The cost of translation was kindly funded by the Department of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire.
- 2 Report from the Inquisitor of the Logroño tribunal, Alonso de Salazar y Frías, to the Supreme Council of the Inquisition relating to the witches of Zugarramurdi who appeared in the Auto de Fe in Logroño in 1610, entitled 'Letter about the outcome of the Visit and the Edict of Grace' (24 March 1612). Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid, Book 797, fol. 16r. See Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition* (Reno, 1980).
- 3 Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', in *Teatro Crítico Universal or Discursos varios en todo género de materia, para desengaño de errores comunes*, vol. 8, Discurso Sexto (Madrid, 1739).
- 4 See Gaspard Delpy, *L'Espagne et l'esprit européen. L'Oeuvre de Feijoo (1725–60)* (Paris, 1936); Richard Herr, *The Eighteenth-Century Revolution in Spain* (Princeton, 1969); Jean Sarrailh, *L'Espagne éclairée de la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1954) and Cirilo Flórez Miguel, *La Filosofía en la Europa de La Ilustración* (Madrid, 1998).
- 5 See 'Demoniacos', in Agustín Millares Carlo (ed.), *Obras escogidas del P. Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro* (Madrid, 1961), p. 7.
- 6 On the concept of the *vulgo* in Feijoo see Ivy L. MacClelland, *Benito Jerónimo Feijoo* (New York, 1969), pp. 19–22 and Andrés Martínez Lois, *El Padre Feijoo. Naturaleza, hombre y conocimiento* (A Coruña, 1989), pp. 91–3.
- 7 See Juan Marichal, 'Feijoo y su papel desengañador de las Españas', in idem, *La voluntad de estilo* (Madrid, 1971), pp. 145–8.
- 8 See Eduardo Subirats, *La Ilustración insuficiente* (Madrid, 1981), pp. 41–9.
- 9 About the need of revelation for the fullness of knowledge, Feijoo had shown himself to be adamant in another of his discourses: 'There are two constants in the sphere of understanding: Revelation and Demonstration. The rest is full of twisting opinions, occurring at will from inferior minds. Whomsoever neglects to

- follow those two points, or one of them, according to the hemisphere he sails through ... will never reach the haven of Truth' (*Teatro Crítico Universal*, vol. 1, discourse 1, 5).
- 10 As Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark maintain, 'we should not be misled by the language used by the Enlightenment crusaders against witchcraft and magic ... To believe too much in witchcraft might have some credulous superstition; but to believe too little in it could still carry the risk of atheism.' See Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1999), p. x.
  - 11 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 8.
  - 12 'Those who in this way are for Authority against Reason, do so out of religious respect, towards that or those doctors who support their opinion ... In those centuries of decadence in learning men studied the little they did study through the Pythagorus method. They did not examine Reason; they only heeded Authority ... Any ruling, opinion or maxim found in a famous author was embraced as an irrefutable truth.' *Cartas Eruditas*, vol. 11 (Madrid, 1745), p. 225.
  - 13 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 38.
  - 14 As well as his many readings on Theology and Church History, Feijoo was familiar with authors as significant as Bacon, Boerhaave, Bossuet, Boyle, Corneille, Descartes, Erasmus, Fénelon, Fontenelle, Gassendi, Kircher, LaBruyère, Leibnitz, Molière, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Muratori, Newton, Pascal, Racine, Rousseau, or Voltaire. See MacClelland, *Benito Jerónimo Feijoo*, pp. 31–40.
  - 15 See Marie-Hélène Cotoni, *L'exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie du dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford, 1984), and Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, 'Religion', in Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche (eds), *Diccionario histórico de la Ilustración* (Madrid, 1998), pp. 197–205.
  - 16 Robert Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1997).
  - 17 Augustin Calmet, *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, 23 vols (Paris, 1707–16).
  - 18 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 38.
  - 19 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 39.
  - 20 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 39.
  - 21 'De la falsa astrología' was the title of chapter 111 of the Second Part of the *Reproación de supersticiones y hechizeras* [*Condemnation of superstition and witchcraft*] written by Pedro Ciruelo around 1530. This famous theologian and mathematician from the University of Salamanca had stood out in Spain for his defence of what he considered to be real astrology, within the great argument of the topic that took place in Spain from the end of the fifteenth until the middle of the sixteenth century.
  - 22 In *El toque de alquimia* [*The touch of alchemy*], a brief treatise composed in the Escorial in 1593, the Irishman Richard Stanyhurst offered some 'signs' with which to tell the real alchemist from the 'sophisticated prankster'. See María Tausiet, 'El toque de alquimia: un método casi infalible dedicado a Felipe II by Richard Stanyhurst', in Javier Campos (ed.), *La ciencia en el monasterio del Escorial* (San Lorenzo del Escorial, 1994), pp. 527–58.
  - 23 See Cristóbal Pérez de Herrera, *Discurso del amparo de legítimos pobres y reducción de los fingidos* (Madrid, 1608).
  - 24 Giuseppe Gazola, *El mundo engañado por los falsos médicos ... Obra póstuma traducida fielmente del toscano* (Valencia, 1978).
  - 25 See Antonio Mestre Sánchis, *Ilustración y reforma de la Iglesia. Pensamiento político y religioso de Don Gregorio Mayans y Siscar, 1699–1781* (Valencia, 1968); Mestre Sánchis, *El mundo intelectual de Mayans* (Valencia, 1978).

- 26 Letter from Mayans to Feijoo dated 18 August 1728. Quoted in Vicente Peset Llorca, *Gregori Mayans i la cultura de la il. Lustració* (Barcelona, 1975), p. 397.
- 27 See Peset Llorca, *Gregori Mayans*, p. 398. For subsequent differences of opinion between Mayans and Feijoo, see Agustín Millares Carlo, 'Feijoo y Mayans', *Revista de Filología Española* 10 (1923), 57–62.
- 28 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 17.
- 29 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 17.
- 30 The *Rituale Romanum*, which still operates today, believed to be the definitive authority in questions of diabolic possession, was edited in four books of ritual from the sixteenth century: the *Castellani Liber Sacerdotalis* (1523), the *Sacerdotale Romanum* (1554), the *Rituale of Cardinal Julio Antonio Sanctorio* (1575) and the *Ordo Baptizandi* (1575). See Herbert Haag, *El Diablo. Su existencia como problema* (Barcelona, 1978), p. 330.
- 31 'In primis, ne facile credat aliquem a daemonio obsessum esse; sed nota habeat ea signa, quibus obsessus dignoscitur ab iss, qui vel atra bile, vel morbo aliquo laborant. Signa obsidentis Daemonis sunt, ignota lingua loqui pluribus verbis, vel loquentum intelligere: distantia et occulta patafacere; vires supra aetatis, seu conditions naturam ostendere, & id genus alia, quae, cum plurima concurrunt, majora sunt indicia', in *Rituale Romanum Pauli V Pont. Maximi jussu editum cum cantu Toletano et appendice ex Manuali Itidem Toletano* (Madrid, 1831), pp. 387–8.
- 32 In spite of the fact that the *Rituale Romanum* did not specify 'the unknown language' in which the truly possessed should speak, sources generally referred to Latin, the language of culture, which supposedly was inaccessible to the illiterate majority through ordinary means.
- 33 Juan Huarte de San Juan, *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias, donde se muestra la diferencia de habilidades que ay en los hombres* (Baeza, 1575). See Guillermo Serés (ed.), *Juan Huarte de San Juan. Examen de ingenios* (Madrid, 1989), p. 314.
- 34 Andrés Velásquez, *Libro de la melancolía, en el cual se trata de la naturaleza de esta enfermedad ... y de sus causas y síntomas. Y el rústico puede hablar latín o filosofar, estando frenético o maniaco, sin primer lo haber aprendido* (Seville, 1585), p. 357. See Roger Bartra, *El siglo de Oro de la melancolía. Textos españoles y novohispanos sobre las enfermedades del alma* (Mexico City, 1998).
- 35 Velásquez, *Libro de la melancolía*, p. 360.
- 36 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 17.
- 37 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 17.
- 38 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 17.
- 39 See Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 161–78.
- 40 In spite of this the girl and her father carried on their way to Paris where she was examined by five doctors at the insistence of the Bishop. The matter even reached the Paris Parliament, which ordered her to go back to her village and not to leave it again. However, 'among those deceived by Marthe Brossier there was an unwise and fearful abbot' who brought the matter to Rome: 'But eventually she was discovered and the comedy rapidly turned to tragedy, and the duped abbot died of grief and Marthe and her father, abandoned and scorned by everybody, remained in the poorhouse.' See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', pp. 11–12, and also M. Marescot, *Discours véritable sur le fait de Marthe Brossier de Romorantin, prétendue démoniaque* (Paris, 1599). A second famous case of possession to which Feijoo also refers in his seventh discourse of vol. IV in his *Teatro Crítico Universal*, relates in graphic detail the events surrounding the famous possession of the convent in Loudun in 1634. See also Michel de Certeau, *La Possession du Loudun* (Paris, 1990); Gabriel Legué and Georges de la

- Tourette (eds), *Jeanne des Anges. Autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée* (Grenoble, 1990); D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1981).
- 41 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 18.
- 42 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 18.
- 43 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 18.
- 44 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 18.
- 45 Feijoo alludes to a nun in the Benedictine convent of Santa María de la Vega, to whom he had referred in his second discourse of the sixth volume of his *Teatro Crítico Universal*, and who he himself decided to expose to prove that her supposed visions were pure coincidences with nothing remarkable about them.
- 46 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 25.
- 47 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 21.
- 48 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', pp. 21–3.
- 49 Benito Remigio Noydens, *Practica de exorcistas, ministros de La Iglesia en que con mucha erudicion, y singular claridad, se trata de la instruccion de los exorcismos para lançar y ahuyentar los demonios y curar espiritualmente todo genero de maleficios y hechizos* (Barcelona, 1675). Noyden's phrase, in which he refers to Feijoo, actually stated: 'Algunos hay que remedan con tal arte y artificio las voces de los animales, que parecen paxaros enjaulados' ['there are those who imitate so skilfully animal noises that they seem like caged birds']. p. 15.
- 50 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 23.
- 51 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 23.
- 52 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 19. The italics are mine.
- 53 'Surely this Devil (to borrow Quevedo's wit) does not know what devilry he is making', 'I am convinced that that Devil is very stupid' (see 'Demoniacos').
- 54 See 'Demoniacos', p. 31.
- 55 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 32.
- 56 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 32.
- 57 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 33.
- 58 At one point, Feijoo even gets to talk about preternatural causes, as a possible way of interpreting certain claimed symptoms of possession: 'If one were to see a possessed person jump up from the street to the roof of a fairly tall building; if a slight woman were to effortlessly manage a weight of thirty or forty loads, or were to do similar things to these, no doubt we would attribute this to preternatural causes.' See 'Demoniacos', p. 21. For distinctions between the concepts of natural, preternatural and supernatural, see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 259–80.
- 59 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 8. For ideas on the poor and vagabonds see Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe (XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1974), and Ole Peter Grell, Andrew Cunningham and Jon Arrizabalaga (eds), *Health Care and Poor Relief in Counter-Reformation Europe* (London and New York, 1999).
- 60 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 8.
- 61 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 10.
- 62 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 10.
- 63 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 10.
- 64 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', pp. 24–5.
- 65 See Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturno y la melancolia estudios de historia de la filosofía de la naturaleza, la religión y el arte* (Madrid, 1991); Jean Céard (ed.), *La folie et le corps* (Paris, 1985); Jean Céard, 'Folie et démonologie au XVIe siècle', in *Folie et déraison à la Renaissance*, Colloque International (Brussels, 1976); Matthew Ramsey, 'Magical Healing, Witchcraft and Elite Discourse

- in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century France', in Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Hilary Marland and Hans de Waardt (eds), *Illness and Healing Alternatives in Western Europe* (London and New York, 1997), pp. 14–37; Mary Lindemann, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1999), and Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth Century Germany* (Stanford, 1999).
- 66 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 35.
- 67 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', pp. 39–40.
- 68 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 40.
- 69 'Women, they say, are more inclined to fury, to terror, to sadness, to despair and the evil spirit finds a certain allure or seduction in these passions. All this is so much hot air, and the things they relate about this one and that one, when she had a terrible fright that the devil was in her, is all rubbish.' (Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 40). We must remember that Feijoo had written an essay entitled 'Defensa de las mujeres' ('In Defence of Women'), in *Teatro Crítico Universal*, vol. 1, 16. However, in this, the female traits that are highlighted, in contrast to the masculine strength, constancy and wisdom are beauty, subservience and simplicity.
- 70 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 40.
- 71 Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 40.
- 72 See Michel de Certeau, 'Le langage alteré. Le parole de la possédée', in idem, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1978), pp. 249–73.
- 73 See Midelfort, *History of Madness*, pp. 49–79, and Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 389–422.
- 74 See Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind. French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1987), pp. 120–39 and María Tausiet, *Los posesos de Tosos. Brujería y justicia popular en tiempos de revolución* (Zaragoza, 2002).
- 75 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 37.
- 76 See Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, p. xii. In Spain, the backlash against Feijonian criticism appeared by the end of the eighteenth century. For example, José Cadalso asserted, in an ironic paragraph dedicated to the Benedictine, regarding fairies and other characters of popular mythology, 'I have ... a treatise just nearing completion against the archcritic Feijoo, with which I prove to the contrary of his most holy and enlightened that cases of fairies, witches, vampires, goblins and phantoms, all of which are genuine, having been claimed by people of good faith, like child nurses, grandmothers, old people and other such authorities, are very common.' José Cadalso, *Cartas Marruecas* (Barcelona, 2000), pp. 163–4.
- 77 Feijoo defended a 'moderate' or 'mitigated' scepticism, as opposed to what he called 'rigid' or 'absolute' scepticism. ('Rigid scepticism is an extravagant madness; moderate scepticism is wise caution'), *Teatro Crítico Universal*, vol. III, discourse 13, 1. In 1725, a year before starting *Teatro Crítico*, the Benedictine had publicised his first public work about scepticism (*Apología del escepticismo medico, en defensa de la Medicina escéptica* by Martín Martínez), returning to the theme later in discourse 13 of vol. III of the *Teatro Crítico*, dedicated to *Escepticismo filosófico* (*Philosophical Scepticism*). See Arturo Ardao, *La filosofía polémica de Feijoo* (Buenos Aires, 1962), pp. 106–227.
- 78 See Alonso de Salazar y Frías, *Carta sobre las cosas que han resultado de la visita y el edicto de gracia*, Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid, Libro 795, fol. 16r.
- 79 See Feijoo, 'Demoniacos', p. 42.