

## MYTHS AND RITES IN DANCE-RHYTHM-THERAPY

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### SYNOPSIS

Neurobiology shows that if our rational intelligence is not nourished by emotion, we are severely handicapped. Myths are produced by symbolic thought also known as creative imagination. They explain the foundation of Man in a non-rational way. Anthropology specifies that myth has to be ritualized, replayed physically, to be effective in the therapeutic plan. This justifies the use of dance to ritualize the myth and make it effective. We shall describe a workshop of dance-rhythm-therapy dedicated to the myth of Demeter and Persephone (Ceres and Proserpine in Roman mythology). The workshop has been held in numerous countries, since this myth has a universal founding dimension. It is an archetype of humanization. It shows how much the unconscious of every human being is an agent, not simply of our individual peculiarities, but the story of the whole of humanity. It loses nothing of its relevance to current events and tells us the origin of Man which, through rhythm, can bind, without confusing, the energy of the vital drives represented by Dionysus and the order of reason, symbolized by Apollo. Through the myth, this workshop brings to life the enthusiasm and the enjoyment of the body-spirit link.

*Keywords: neurobiology, myth, rite, archetype, efficacy, symbolism, law, rhythm*

In his famous study, neurobiologist Antonio Damasio (1994) showed that if our rational intelligence is not nourished by emotion, we are severely handicapped. He argues that Descartes' error was the dualist separation of mind and body, rationality and emotion. How can we avoid this typically western flaw in dance therapy, to solicit excessively either rational explanation or emotion? While in some therapies the patients will have to find laboriously 'logical' causes for their life's events, in others they will be pressed to 'discharge' their affects without elaboration.

Arts therapies should, however, be able to offer an equilibrium between these two sides since art necessarily unites inspiration and technique, hence emotion and reason, since expression of affects must proceed through rules in order to be shared. But a workshop is often divided into two parts, one devoted to artistic expression, the other for rationalizing verbally. Many patients become sulky with the latter, while others launch into an endless verbal flux. Is it possible not to divide the subject in two: emotion and imagination on the one hand; intellect and reason on the other?

### **SENSATION AND SIGNIFICATION:**

In front of an artwork, one may exclaim, "It speaks to me," but our enthusiasm weakens as soon as one has to specify what it 'speaks'. We are able to elaborate on the subject, analyze the composition, evaluate the relation between the forms and discuss the contrasts of colour, but we often fail to express in words the emotion that is aroused in us. This quite commonplace point raises the question of the distinction between signification and sensation.

*Signification* is a rational, objective, intellectual, conceptual representation that can be expressed in words and which is universal. *Sensation* is a bodily, perceptive (*aesthetics* means that which goes through 'aesthesis', the senses in Greek language), subjective, irrational and non-conceptual representation that cannot be expressed in words since it makes something other reverberate in us, something alien, unknown, untranslatable. This is the unconscious, which the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan names 'Real' or 'Other'. It partakes of the body, but extends beyond the senses towards the unlimited; a kind of 'super-nature', of 'super-reality'. It is to this unknown that art 'speaks', it addresses the subject of the unconscious, and baffles the subject of the conscious, which cannot hear what it 'speaks'. Signification is what the work 'speaks' to reason and to the ego, while the sense is what the subject of the unconscious 'hears'. Sensation is unconscious and governed by primary processes; signification is conscious and obeys secondary processes - that is to say the speaking of a rational discourse.

This distinction may be more familiar to us than we realise in the famous idea of Nietzsche's that we have been given art so as not to die from truth. To express it otherwise, art does not give us signification but sensation; the 'Real', shaped by body recollections, imagination and emotions, cannot be

told, but it can take a shape, be painted, musicalised, danced. Here is the secret of art's effectiveness: it awakens in us a physical vibration, a bodily resonance which is evidence that this internal presence really exists. Usually, western people, rationalists and dualists, have difficulty accessing the 'Real', whose darkness opposes the reason of 'Enlightenment'. Lacan insists on *the opacity of the real*, ever unknowable, which allows us to exist as subjects and yet remains hidden or veiled<sup>1</sup>. Paradoxically, Freud, the theoretician of the unconscious, could only access art through rational analysis, and he deplored it (Freud 1914/ 71).

His inability to approach an art work in a direct, vibratory, non conceptual way, in itself and for itself, made Freud unresponsive to music. This attitude quickly leads to a representation and narrative interpretation, and caused psychoanalysis to drift progressively toward a rationalizing ego-psychology, of which the arts therapies are not free. One can sometimes bear witness to a 'reading', or interpretation, of a patient's visual, musical or gestural expressive output, which appears to transfix convincingly psychological meaning; it deprives their artistic expression of mystery and reduces their transpersonal forces to a simple expression of the self. This is doing an injustice to the patients and when they can, they rightly resist.

## 1. A MEDIAN WAY: THE MYTH

Rationalizing interpretation raises an ethical question, which leads one to consider other modes of care, such as traditional therapies. Anthropology shows that shamans, the surviving ancestors of arts therapists, do not of course use psychological interpretations, but instead use dramatic and legendary words and myths. This places them in stark opposition to the belief, inherited from the Enlightenment, that explanation is the 'royal way' to recovery. Myth is a Greek word ('muthos' means spoken word, utterance, saying, legend) but all cultures in the world provide myths. They are produced by symbolic thought (also named 'mythical' or 'savage'), also known as creative imagination. They are carried by oral tradition, through speaking, danced songs and theatre. They 'explain' in a non-rational way, in a symbolic language and through poetic, rather than logical analogies, for example, the creation of the universe (Genesis), the birth of gods (through mating of sky Ouranos and Earth Gaia) and of man (Adam and Eve), of civilization (Prometheus giving



fire to mankind), the regeneration of our world after a disaster (The Deluge), the end of the world (Apocalypse) or the meaning of illnesses (caused by supernatural forces).

Myths pose questions unbearable to reason. Why do they withstand the passage of time, when they talk about a non-existent world?

### **A REALITY TRUER THAN TRUTH**

A myth resonates in us although it enacts heroes, gods and goddesses who do not belong to our times, because, according to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958/63), it is built on elements permanently present in all humans of all times, it is out of time, or from another time, out of history.

It tells stories that are strange to our daily life, lived by super-natural characters which are not like us in any way. Yet it sounds true because it is much more than a mere poetic narrative, or the archaic expression of a pre-scientific thought. It is not a belief, accepted as it is (Veyne, 1983). Though it may seem arbitrary; actually it is allegorical; it translates into symbols a vital and enigmatic content made up of drives, emotions and recollections. These awake the 'Other' and resonate with it.

### **THE ALTERITY OF MYTH**

The subject of the unconscious is what, inside us, 'hears' a reality other than the everyday 'truth'. So, most psychoanalysts acknowledge the therapeutic importance of myths which echo with the unconscious. They make present the otherness of the 'second world'; the mystery of this alterity that traditional cultures attribute to the sacred (the supernatural entities) and psychoanalysis to the unconscious, the 'Other' in us. Taking into account this unconscious registering of the 'Other' is what most concerns therapy. Only the 'Other' is strong enough to release us from the Ego and its symptoms.

Jacques Lacan sees the gods as strong 'solid' representations of the 'Other', thus explaining their therapeutic function: *Gods, there were loads of them, gods, you just found the right one, and it [had the same effect as a psychoanalysis].* He underscores the strength of mythical therapies and adds, resignedly: *let's pass over the weakness of the analytical operation!*

Should we give up their effectiveness on account of our disbelief in gods and demons, despite the fact that, however indignant our reason may be, their evocation in mythology releases in us a train of emotion? Jung boldly asserted that our illnesses are gods that we have neglected. May we invite them to the table of arts therapies?

### SYMBOLIC EFFICACY

In a chapter named 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 186-205) the anthropologist makes comprehensible the work of a Cunas Indian Shaman from Panama, who in this case treats a woman in danger of death at the time of giving birth. The shaman sings to her a mythical epic poem, making sense of her illness by transposing it into a story about how the shaman will deliver the foetus's soul that has been captured by a spirit. After numerous breathless adventures through dark grottos and viscous tunnels, he rediscovers the lost soul and brings it toward deliverance. The mother and child are saved.

The chosen example is local, but its therapeutic principles are those of shamanism everywhere. Lévi-Strauss discloses to us the mechanism and names it *symbolic efficacy*. Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that the shaman's words carry a sense of the mythical, not of the real. If they referred in ordinary terms to the pathological manifestation, he specifies, they would lose their efficacy. He even emphasises the fact that it is because the myth is not rational that it heals. The words used by the shaman to describe the patient's spiritual epic carry a mythical sense rather than a realistic one.

The sick person does not *know* that the cave and the tunnels symbolize her genital apparatus; nor that the shaman's voyage represents the birthing process. Despite this non-knowledge, this non-thought, she *knows* it unconsciously and her body actively accompanies the twists and turns of the story right up to the delivery. According to Lacan, it is the discourse of the unconscious that is transformative: "*Unconscious knowing is what changes, that which effects change, that which is capable of reducing the symptom*" (Lacan, 1977).

Citing Desoille, the inventor of Directed Daydreaming, Lévi-Strauss brings to our attention that *psychopathological disturbances are accessible only through the language of symbol*". The success of the cure demands the poetic masquerade of

mythology. *That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter.* The anthropologist even suggests that the truth would be less therapeutic than the symbol. Why is it that speaking about viruses and germs does not heal the flu any more than the 'rational' explanation of a parent's misdeeds relieves the neurotic of his suffering, while a fabulation, a narrative about monsters can cure a sickness? Lévi-Strauss ventures an answer, almost apologising for its paradoxical nature: *...the reason lies in the fact that microbes exist and monsters do not.*

This 'explanation' of the efficacy of myth by a scientific authority, as prominent as Lévi-Strauss, is bewildering for a Cartesian dualist who bridles because his reason 'forgets' his body. And indeed without the body the myth's sense is lost. It has to be a spoken word, a portrayed narration, replayed, evoked, re-actualized. This is the role of rite. The dramatherapists know that very well, but it can also be through a dance rite that we can solicit the therapeutic power of a myth.

## **2. A DANCE-RHYTHM-THERAPY-RITUAL**

The rite consists in replaying the myth. 'Mythotherapy' and 'ritotherapy' are a whole. In replaying the myth the body re-presents, that is, it makes it present again, perceptible, tangible and indisputable owing to the resonance through the senses upon drives, affects, images, which give a 'corporal proof' of its truthfulness. The rite is the myth given life. In traditional societies it sets up a living proximity with the gods, so bodily present that the faithful share their existence with body and soul, into trance, where they become the god (Dunham 1969). The many possession rites existing in the world make the gods 'known from inside' and their *horse* (the possessed) reiterates their story and they, themselves, become the hero. So, he who corporally takes part in the myth on which the rite is based takes part again in the process which founded it. His transformation is a re-creation of himself.

Therefore, a rite is much more than a mere ceremony. The staging of the myth demands all the respect and ceremonial due to its non-ordinary character, and the narration is theatricalised, sung, musicalised and danced following strict rules. The therapeutic mechanism of these therapies leads us to propose ritualizing in dance-rhythm-therapy some founding myth by creating versions



of collective 'primal scenes' where archetypes can resonate with personal problems, so that each participant may represent and express him/herself in rhythmic gestures both vocalized and danced.

### THE MYTH OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

This is a Greek myth and Demeter and Persephone are archetypes. We have used it in many countries with participants of all nationalities who have all become deeply involved. Here we draw on a particular strand of the story of Perséphone; how The Father (Zeus), with a rhythical, temporal Law, separates the child (Persephone) from her mother (Demeter) in order to be able to articulate the three levels, Underearth, Earth and Heaven: to link instincts, words and art or spirituality.

At Eleusis in ancient Greece a secret, esoteric and initiated cult took place, the *Mysteria*, where many people came seeking renewal and transformation through initiation: Roman emperors as well as philosophers side by side with women and slaves. The content of the *Mysteria* was indissolubly philosophical and mystical, as was Greek thought as a whole: think of Plato who strewed his philosophy with myths (the cave, the demiurge, the great architect of the Universe), mixing discursive rationality with poetic inspiration, *mythos* and *logos*, in a synthesis of emotional and rational understanding which probably was the secret of the Greek genius.

The myth that was experienced and performed in Eleusis was so strong and essential that it survived through the ages until in 391 A.D. the emperor of Byzantium, Theodosius, forbade it. It was performed in front of and with the neophytes, both audience and actors. We know this myth through Homer's hymn to Demeter (end of 7th century BCE) of which we shall quote a few passages.

Demeter (called Ceres in Roman mythology) was known as "*the fair haired earth goddess who blesses all phases of the harvest. She walks the furrowed fields dressed in green and displays her moods with feast and famine.*" Demeter had a very close bond with her daughter Koré-Persephone (Proserpina), born from her union with her brother Zeus (Jupiter).

The drama begins with a poignant parting: the God of the Underworld, Hades (Pluto), once saw Persephone and fell deeply in love with her. *"There is a lake embowered in woods which screen it from the fervid rays of the sun, while the moist ground is covered with flowers, and Spring reigns perpetual,"* where Persephone played with her companions. At a certain point, she came across a flower (narcissus) which, once plucked, caused the Earth to open beneath her, and she was taken by force into the Underworld. There, she became the wife of Hades and Queen of the Underworld. Demeter, was *"consumed with rage and sorrow,"* became very depressed, refused to nourish the earth, which in turn threatened the very existence of man. It was, in fact, *"because Demeter abandoned her divine functions to look for Persephone, [that] the springs of fertility ran dry: vegetation languished, animals ceased to multiply, and the hand of death touched mankind."* Finally, Zeus (Jupiter) decided to resolve the situation by sending his messenger Hermes (Mercury) to demand Persephone from Hades.

The tricky god agreed but he put in Persephone's mouth *"the delicious food"*, the pomegranate's pip that would forever bind her to the subterranean world. Back again on the ground in Hermes' cart, she met again with delight her mother Demeter who, however, understood from her daughter that she would have to go back to the dark sojourn. She suggested that her daughter should come back up from the foggy underworld each time the Earth smelt of flowers' scent and accepted Zeus' decision: Persephone was to spend a third of the year with her lover in underworld, another third with her mother and with mankind on earth, and the final third was to be in heaven with her father and the gods. Demeter, soothed and consoled, initiated leaders of Eleusis, Eumolpos and Triptolemos, to the culture of wheat, from which the Eleusis Mysteries was to be born, along with Orpheus.

### THE MEANING OF THE ELEUSIS MYSTERIA

Aristotle was an initiate and affirmed that the Eleusis cult was not something to be understood but to be received as a revelation. As for us, we are constrained to analyze it by thought.

The myth of Persephone offers a spatial representation of human psyche:



- The underworld, Hades' kingdom, is that of the dead, of oblivion, of negation of civilization. It is the domain of instincts, of free drives, of fusion-confusion, of disordered energies, where the *id* rules, that is without measure, with all directional enjoyment, sex and death intertwined.
- The heavens, the Olympian kingdom, are the opposite of the underworld. They are the clear, luminous, differentiated and ordered world: each god has a clearly delimited function and exists far away and separated from humans. Zeus, father of gods and humans, rules the order as a harsh *superego*: according to the myth of Aristophanes as related by Plato, he punishes the pride of early humans, bisexual and arrogant, who wanted to fight against the gods, by cutting them in two, and the navel is the scar which still 'proves' that this mythical punishment is 'true'. But with Persephone, Zeus exerts his paternal function with measure, 'mathematically'.

Earth, where Persephone will spend the same lapse of time, is the world in-between, the one of humans whose *ego* must continually negotiate between the sensualist *id* and the castrating *superego*, must reconcile the madness of demoniac drives with the Olympian reason which makes differentiation and order.

The psyche is also temporally represented: Persephone will spend equal amounts of time in each place, following a rhythm dividing the year into three periods. Her second name, Koré is a generic name for 'the girl'. It means that the young human has to learn how to regulate the relation between instincts and civilization, nature and culture.

Demeter, the mother separated from her daughter whom she loved most, as well as the lover Hades, will have to accept the rhythmical rule dictated by Zeus. The father intervenes in order to regulate the mother-child bond by distributing a time for the symbiotic enjoyment and a time for social investment.

This myth retells the story of man's path to humanization by metaphorically retracing the child's development toward subject-hood through a spatial and temporal structuralisation of its psyche. It is both a civilizing and therapeutic myth, expressing the humanizing (since it is differentiating) Law (Schott-Billmann 2006).

## CREATIVE IMAGINATION

This Law is the natural law which allows the child to connect to each of the three worlds without mixing them or giving preference to any: the human being, son of earth and the starry sky (as said the Eleusis initiates), will be equally part of the sphere of the body and of invisible language, of animal nature and of the sublime.

To and fro between the two, he will discover the absence-presence and he will mediate them by inventing symbol, language, his inspired conquest (Freud 1981, p51-55). Now, sociable and regulated, it has tamed in him the fire of instinct without eradicating it, nor forgetting the body.

To reach that 'cross-breeding' he had to unite within him, without intermingling them, the passion-drive, fusion-emotion disorder on the one hand and the concept-trenchant-logic-reason order on the other. By limiting the excess of both of them, the regulated self has canalized the gushing vital energy of the *id*, and revitalized the death-carrying order of the *superego*.

This myth, symbol of the origin and foundation of humankind, has always amazed us by its impact and creative power, as if it had kept all its original strength. The ritual of the dance-rhythm-therapy workshop does not at all claim to imitate the sacred part of the Eleusis ritual (of which in fact very little is known). But *Primitive Expression* revives corporally the origin: the mother is made present through prime rhythms (pulsation and to and fro motion) which replay the maternal heart pulsation and breathing perceived during pregnancy. Rhythmic memories surge up again and joy bursts out.

The way to mix the 'sensible' and the 'numerical' (rhythm is a mathematical pattern) uses the same processes as the mother humanizing the child. Indeed we think, following Daniel Stern (Stern 1985), Françoise Dolto (Dolto, 1982) and Didier Anzieu (Anzieu 1994), that the therapist's role is similar to that of the *good enough mother* (Winnicott 1971), loving but not symbiotic, who conveys to the child the humanizing Law through lullabies, rhythmic play, the exchange of smiles and mimicry. *Primitive Expression*, by ritualizing the plays of transitional space (Schott-Billmann 2011, p92), rhythmically convenes this ideal mother, who, through play, releases the child from fixedness to one of the three psychical dimensions.

The technique takes up this childish part which is expressed by the energy, repetition and simplicity of movements, but intends it for everyone, since any human during the course of life has to move about between worlds and tirelessly weave the bond between them, if he or she wants to escape the dualism that separates and divides them.

After having collectively danced-sung-played the myth, participants are invited to gather in small groups to compose poetic creations, vocal and corporeal. These are the 'Persephone's raps'. A rap is a vocal expression born in the American ghetto of the 1970s within the hip-hop movement. It consists of rhymed verses, told in a rhythm with a marked pulsation. Here is the most recent one, created by a mixed group of four persons, teenagers and adults of various ages:

*This is Persephone's story  
Beautiful as her mother Demeter,  
She was so sweet,  
She picked Hell's flower,  
Darkness masks her face,  
But doesn't record her way through  
Mother sad and angry  
Wants her daughter back to light.*

*C'est l'histoire de Perséphone,  
Belle comme sa mère Déméter.  
Elle était tellement mignonne,  
Qu'elle a cueilli la fleur d'Enfer.  
Les ténèbres masquent son visage  
Sans faire acte de son passage  
Sa mère triste et en colère,  
Veut que sa fille r'vienne à la lumière !*

Does the reader feel the presence of the body in these small pieces? The breath, the heart beat are projected in the staccato voice and in foot strikes, the automatism of vital rhythms is expressed in the dancer's repetitive movements.



How can we appreciate the 'childish' freshness of this choreography enlivened by recollections of play; be made to feel the delight which moves the dancers: their thrill enjoyed, distanced, with a shade of the light melancholy of the adult who knows he or she usually has mostly lost this state of grace? The word *enthusiasm* might sum up the emotional tone. Its etymology unveils its meaning: *en-theos* means in greek to have the god within. But which god? In fact it is twofold: Hades moderated by Zeus' Law, the impetuous Dionysos crossed with the cool Apollo.

The secret of the Mysteries may perhaps reside in this non-oblivion of internal instincts, 'infernal', symbolized by the pomegranate pip, taking the body into account without excluding the spirit. The Eleusis treasure, both cultural and therapeutic, was lost along the centuries, owing in particular to the evolution of Christianity and the philosophy of the Enlightenment which, in conjunction with political powers, fiercely fought its offspring in peasant culture. Now veiled, it has yet remained in the popular heritage of which Nietzsche recalls its Dionysian origin and multisensorial quality where music-dance-theater-poetry are not dissociated.

By creating these 'raps', in which vital rhythms are convened in order to re-enact a myth in a creation where the poetic text, the music and the movement have equal importance, the 'rappers' live Persephone's story as much as they 'think' it. Involving both body and spirit, they 'hear' beyond the senses the archetype 'speaking' of themselves, recounting their double cross-bred identity, Nature-Culture, inviting them to the dancing movement, unceasing shuttle between emotion and reason from which emerge meaning, symbol, creative imagination.

Humanity owes to this jubilatory creativity its most beautiful inventions, provided that, as Persephone, it keeps within itself the pomegranate pip, and hence severs itself neither from the 'hell' of vital drives, nor from the 'heaven' where they are sublimated, nor from 'earth', the place of co-creation with other humans.

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