

THEATRE AND PSYCHE

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Dedicated to the memory of the late David Holt, long-term stalwart of the O.P.S. For over 30 years his work returned again and again to the questions that psyche and theatre open up for each other. This short paper is, I hope, in the spirit of that work.

(Word count: 3433)

Image, Psyche, Logos

At the heart of Jung's psychology is his emphasis on the primacy of image. This emphasis serves to free him from the subjectivist and positivist theoretical assumptions which bedevil most of contemporary psychology. It enables an approach to psyche which acknowledges the importance of full reflexivity and enables us to see that the idea of scientific observation which underlies the modern worldview is a mirage: we cannot perceive without being perceived: the psychic image requires participation, outside of objectivity and subjectivity. Jung's is an approach that sustains and is sustained by ambiguity and paradox.

In what follows I am addressing the question: what are we engaged in when we work with soul, and how are we engaged? In order to do this I use the analogy of the theatrical event. The world of theatre is itself a world of paradox – an upside down realm where oppositions such as subject/object, self/other, cause/effect no longer hold. This liminal world is equivalent to the imaginal realm, the world of soul, a locus neither literal nor spiritual but somehow mediating between the two. The vision of theatre is speculative, though the reflection it allows stems not from a literal representation of positive fact, an external reflection, but from an internal reflection by which the positive is dissolved into a negative Dionysian dismemberment. In theatre, the actor as positive person is subsumed and lost in the role, becoming neither real nor unreal, but something else, playing between the two. Many parallels have been drawn between the theatrical event and the ritual event, wherein the participant is absorbed into the role or spirit that he represents. However, pre-modern (mythological/ritual) consciousness entailed a thorough participation in a world where there was no split between man and the gods, or matter and spirit. When however this gash in the

cosmic weave occurred and introduced a new dualistic awareness, modern (self-)consciousness required a reflective mediation which surpassed that of ritual. Historically western theatre came into its own at precisely this turning point. Crucially, the theatrical event goes beyond ritual participation by virtue of the presence of the audience, which has a dual role: it both witnesses and takes part in what occurs. On the one hand the distance between audience and performance makes room for detachment and reflection. On the other, however, the audience cannot remain entirely distanced, observing the drama from afar. The theatrical event requires it to be pulled into the vessel, as it were, and its very presence affects what occurs. It has one foot in and one foot out.

Theatre is all about seeing. That is what 'theatre' means. It derives from the Greek word *θεατρον* (theatron), which means a place for seeing. If we wish to engage with psyche on its own terms, and with Jung believe that 'image is psyche' (Jung, 1929, §75) then it is crucial that we think about what it means to engage with image. The metaphor of theatre provides this and it does so because it is essentially dialectical, thus allowing room for the many faceted reflexivities that we come up against when we start to involve ourselves in image and how to look at it. I have tried to approach my subject with a Dionysian eye, as Dionysus was, for the Greeks, god of theatre. A truly Dionysian *theoria* provides us with a wealth of insight, both psychological and theatrical.

The Essence of Theatre

Theatre is an event but it is also a place, a marked out liminal area which Peter Brook has described as 'the empty space'. It resembles the Tao – empty and formless yet with the potential to contain an infinity of things. It is a place of Truth, in Heidegger's sense, *aletheia*: "the dynamic emergence of being into the light of manifestness and a simultaneous persistence in hiddenness and

concealment". (Arens, 1984, p.18) The paradox is profoundly Dionysian. Here in this event/place occurs the mirror play of the world, in which soul and nature reflect each other. In the Greek theatre, the spectator, seated on a hillside under the open heavens, participated in an interplay of earth, sky, gods and mortals.

A keyword of the Dionysian is 'fluidity'. Theatre allows a fluidity of place, time and identity. With a prop or a mere word a performer can locate the action of the play wherever he wishes. Within a single act the audience may be whisked from one country to another, from a warm room to a wind-blown heath. But not only may a few words enable us to cross continents, we can leap forward twenty years or back two thousand. Or, as in Japanese Noh theatre, time may become extraordinarily slow and concentrated through the absolute economy and discipline of the actor, who although he can take five minutes to reach the centre of the stage, nonetheless can travel from one province to another in a single step. What is remarkable is that an audience is not at all disturbed by this elasticity of time and place. Within the fictional envelope almost anything can occur and be accepted, not as reality, but as 'reality'. One place can flow into another, one time into another time, one person into another person. Psychologically this corresponds to the dissolution of the positivities of ego perspective, the apparently rigid discrete entities which in our everyday consciousness we perceive as *this* person, *this* place, or *this* time.

There are two ways of seeing: one the positive, concrete, everyday mode by means of which we sit in a room and witness some actors dressing up, moving around the stage and declaiming, (or as Ralph Richardson once defined acting: 'Shouting in the evening') and the other which is the way of imagination, in which we both inhabit and are inhabited by the images we witness. If we employ the former approach, we remain in duality: I, the subject, look at you, the object, separated and ultimately untouched. Nothing can occur because I remain in the fastness of my subjective ego consciousness, and from there the world is unanimated and flat. But if we are taken by the

Dionysian perspective we open ourselves to a paradoxical universe in which subject and object lose their solidity and we experience a fluidity of place, time and identity that can be transforming.

In theatre, unbeknownst to itself, the audience is a crucial participant. Without it there is no theatrical event. Just as the audience is reacting to all that it witnesses, with laughter, gasps or simply a pregnant silence, so the performers are constantly aware of and reacting to the contribution of the audience. The audience is, therefore, *not* a passive consumer of the events on stage but a true participant inasmuch as it partakes of a fully reciprocal relationship with the performers.

The Bacchae: Dionysus and Theatre

Euripides' *Bacchae* is uniquely valuable for this enquiry because it is a play which concerns the god Dionysus and the nature of theatre itself. As Charles Segal says,

'By bringing Dionysus himself on the stage and symbolically enacting the power of Dionysiac illusion, Euripides raises and explores the question of how the falsehood of (dramatic) fiction can bring us truth, how by surrendering ourselves and losing ourselves to the power of imagination we can in some measure find ourselves, discover or recover some hidden, unfamiliar part of our identity.' (Segal, 1997, p.217)

In the first place, Dionysus stands before the audience, or rather, a man playing the role of a god appears on the stage. As the play unfolds the god pretends to be a man, or rather the actor playing the role pretends to be a god pretending to be a man. The audience is required to have a kind of double vision. On the one hand, it is fully involved in what occurs on stage: We are told that when

in Aeschylus' Eumenides the furies entered, women miscarried and children fainted. On the other hand, as we have seen there is also a sense of detachment. This distance allows the audience to appreciate the play as a whole and crucially encourages reflection on what it witnesses. Without the involvement, the experience of taking part in the performance, the reflection would be valueless. And without the detached reflection there would be merely a loss of consciousness. This doubleness of perspective is profoundly Dionysian: He is a god who is both very near and very distant and as we have seen his mask symbolizes his double epiphany.

Throughout the play, Euripides emphasizes the theme of illusion. Dionysus creates various apparitions which confuse and undermine Pentheus' sense of his own authority: Again and again the attention of the audience is drawn to the illusions which the god can bring, and by extension, to the fictive, symbolic aspect of a theatre in which we never see what is literally there. This Dionysian seeing is an experience, which carries meaning only if all those involved, actors and audience, enter the de-literalised world of imagination. The structures of authority in everyday life need, like Pentheus' palace, to crash to the ground, revealing themselves as yet another imaginal construct.

Theatre is a place for seeing, and how you see is important. Euripides points to the radical otherness of the Dionysian perspective by his repeated use of verbs for 'seeing' in the play. The most important of these occurs when Pentheus first interrogates the stranger about his god. He asks him, 'How did you see him? In a dream, or face to face?' (468) For Pentheus, there are only two ways to see, one valid and one invalid, either the god was there or he wasn't. The stranger replies obliquely: 'ὄρων ὄρωντα' 'I saw him seeing me'. As Vernant says, this reply

stresses that the god's epiphany has nothing to do with the dichotomy that shapes the convictions of Pentheus...The vision demanded by the masked god is something far beyond those two forms of

knowledge, of which it makes a mockery. It is based on the meeting of two gazes in which (as in the interplay of reflecting mirrors), by the grace of Dionysus, a total reversibility is established between the devotee who sees and the god who is seen, where each one is, in relation to the other, at once the one who sees and the one who makes himself seen. (Vernant, 1990, p.393)

The relation of audience to actor similarly partakes of this reversibility, as does the relation of actor to role.

Moreover, the relation of the ego to that radical otherness which constitutes the unconscious psyche is far from being that of subject observing object. When we encounter the unconscious psyche, it may sometimes feel as though we are observers, but if we are open to the experience, it may quite as often be a case of us being observed. The dichotomy itself ceases to bear meaning. Better is the pregnant phrase, ‘ὄρων ὄρωντα’, ‘I saw him seeing me’.

As long as we distance ourselves from the experience of otherness that the unconscious and everything that it brings us necessarily possesses, pretending that we are not *in* it but ‘just looking’, then we will be like the Guard in Alice Through the Looking Glass, who looked at Alice ‘first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass. At last he said, ‘You’re going the wrong way,’ and shut up the window and went away.’ To the ordinary day-vision of subject and object, the unconscious does indeed appear to be going ‘the wrong way’.

In *Mysterium Coniunctionis* Jung talks about the experience of active imagination and in two places he uses the image of the theatre as the one best suited to his subject. First, he gives a practical description of what the active imaginer can expect. As the images begin to flow, he says, we can either sit back and enjoy it as an entertainment *out there*, or we may start to see that ‘The piece that is being played does not want merely to be watched impartially, it wants to compel [the imaginer’s]

participation. If [the imaginer] understands that his own drama is being performed on this inner stage, he cannot remain indifferent to the plot and its denouement.’ (Jung, 1955-6, §706)

Later Jung comes back to this image. He talks about the way in which modern man may experience the reality of the psychic process: ‘Although, to a certain extent, he looks on from outside, impartially, he is also an acting and suffering figure in the drama of the psyche.’ (Jung, 1955-6, §753) So long as you just stare at the pictures, Jung says, nothing transformative happens and nothing will happen. But...

If you recognize your own involvement, you yourself must enter into the process with your personal reactions, just as if you were one of the fantasy figures, or rather, *as if the drama being enacted before your eyes were real*. It is a psychic fact that this fantasy is happening, and it *is as real as you - as a psychic entity - are real*. (Jung, 1955-6, §753)

Jung introduces these passages by saying that the active imaginer must stare at his ‘contemptible fantasy’ until one day his eyes will open, ‘or as the alchemists say, until the fish’s eyes, or the sparks, shine in the dark solution.’ (Jung, 1955-6, §752) This reference is significant because it takes us back to a passage in ‘On the Nature of the Psyche’ in which Jung states that in his view these multiple luminosities correspond to tiny conscious phenomena in the unconscious psyche. (Jung, 1954b, §388-396) What is striking here is the way in which Jung plays with ideas of subjectivity and objectivity. The active imaginer is portrayed both as an audience member who sees his personal dramas played out on the stage *and* as acting suffering figure in the drama of the psyche. This is underscored by the reference to the alchemist who, we are told, starts to *see* at the exact moment when the fishes’ eyes start to shine, i.e. when he begins to *be seen*.

In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus reveals his logos: to see psychologically, i.e. through the imagination, we must forfeit our separate, observer status and become what we see. The audience's involvement in the play, and the actor's involvement in his role, requires precisely this creative, imaginative, truly psychological abdication of 'self' as radically separate subject. This step involves a giving up of the Cartesian model of observing subject and dead object. Pentheus desires to view what fascinates him while at the same time remaining immune from it. This is an example of what Giegerich has called the contraceptive theory of knowledge, '... a longing for knowledge that allows contact with what is to be known only if 'contraceptives' are used.' (Giegerich, 1999, p.253) The bleak irony of this scene is that what Pentheus believes to be a 'contraceptive', the maenad costume, identifies him as one of those who have given themselves up to Dionysian knowledge, and thus one who must undergo the fate of both god and victim: dismemberment. Thus the costume here acts like a mask in that it seems to conceal but actually reveals a deeper truth. This irony is deepened when Pentheus, now dressed as a maenad, asks coyly, 'Do I look like anyone, like Ino or my mother Agave?' Both parts, mother and son, would have been played by the same actor. Moreover, as Pentheus, in women's clothes, asks the effeminate stranger how he looks, the audience witnesses a strange doubling, almost a mirroring, which itself echoes Pentheus' 'I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities...' (918).

It is impossible to analyse fully the effect of these different layers of metaphor on an audience, but what is certain is that all positivistic certainty has been long since shed. As audience members taking part in a theatrical event, our vision is already doubled but here Euripides masterfully ensures that we have the queasy experience of looking at a mirror reflecting a mirror reflecting a mirror... Pentheus' desire to become a spectator, to watch safely from afar, reminds us that this is what we, as audience members, seem to be engaged in. However, far from being an objective witness of events, a hidden onlooker, Pentheus is to become the protagonist in what ensues and full though unwilling

participant in the drama. Indeed his participation ‘will prove necessary to the full performance of the rites that he would witness’ (Segal, 1997, p.225), and this tells us that in some sense we too must undergo his fate, by sacrificing the safety of distance and sympathetically experiencing the *fóbo\$* and *@leo\$*, fear and pity, which according to Aristotle constitute catharsis, and that this itself is necessary for the full performance of the rites of Dionysus.

What we are sacrificing is the Cartesian split of mind and body, inner and outer, objective and subjective, which allows us to observe the world with the security of distance. As analysts, this is a security we cannot afford. As Jung says,

‘The psychotherapist should no longer labour under the delusion that the treatment of neurosis demands nothing more than the knowledge of a technique; he should be absolutely clear in his own mind that psychological treatment of the sick is a *relationship* in which the doctor is involved quite as much as the patient.’ (Jung, 1934, §352)

Conclusion

As psychotherapists, whether we are addressing a dream or a narrative of childhood trauma or simply a description of the patient’s everyday life, our model cannot be that of the natural scientist poring over his specimen, lights turned up, measuring, comparing, dissecting. It seems to me that our job is rather to clear a space for the self-presentation of the play of psyche. For this to occur the bright lights of ego consciousness need to be turned down in a kind of *abaissement de niveau mental*, so that it becomes possible to discern the dim phosphorescences emanating from the unconscious psyche, the starry heavens and fishes eyes of the alchemists. As we have seen, in these circumstances it is far from clear what constitutes object and what subject. In such a complex field of interaction it is perhaps more fruitful to talk about the subtle reflexivity and mutuality of vision.

This is the arena in which the theatrical model usefully comes into play. The images that the patient brings to us make up a living, shimmering fabric which reveals different facets of itself as the light catches it. It exists only in the meeting of our gaze and its self-revelation, both passive and active. As all we experience is image, this must, in a subtle sense, be true for all human life. When Shakespeare has Prospero say, 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on,' he refers simultaneously to our status as humans and as actors in 'the great theatre of the world', and thus equates dream, life and theatre. The mysterious and ultimately unanalysable grandeur of the line stems from a deep intuition about the paradoxical nature of the image. It is in its ability to do justice to the complex ambiguities present in this mode of seeing that the theatrical model stands out. It uniquely conveys what it is to touch and be touched by image. Active and passive, present and absent, true and false, engaged and detached, somehow all these, preeminently Dionysian, opposites make up theatre, and also somehow, our relation to the unconscious psyche.

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