



*Myths of the Voice*  
Malérargues, July 4 to 17 2005

## Forum of Ideas and Discussions (2) : Exchanges with Sonu Shamdasani

Updated 20 June 2005

Main Forum on <http://www.pantheatre.com/6-archives-gb.html>

Enrique Pardo "On Subjectivity" on <http://www.pantheatre.com/pdf/6-archives-MV05-subjectivity-gb.pdf>

This forum page is edited by Enrique Pardo (EP).

Sonu Shamdasani is presented in the 2005 Summer Festival brochure in the following succinct terms: Historian of psychology and Jung scholar, specialist in pre-Freudian voices, great critic of post-Freudian voices.

He is one of Pantheatre's *Myth and Theatre* main advisors, having contributed to most festivals over the last 20 years. We owe him the phrase, crucial for our events: "the dance of ideas."

Recent publications: *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: The Dream of A Science*. Cambridge University Press, December 2003. *Jung stripped bare* by his biographers, even. London 2004. About to be published: *Le dossier Freud: Enquete sur l'histoire de la psychanalyse*, Le Seuil. With Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen

These exchanges make reference to:

A 1973 letter written by Roy Hart to a journalist who had proposed to record a film or television programme on his work. Roy Hart uses a poem he was performing at the time as reference in his response. The poem is titled "Biodrame".

Biodrame : a poem written by Serge Béhar in 1972 for Roy Hart – Both Roy Hart's letter and Biodrame are available on Paul Silber's archives on : <http://www.roy-hart.com/pauls.htm>

Psychologies as ontology-making practices: William James and the pluralities of psychological experience. A lecture by Sonu Shamdasani. Available on request from [pan@pantheatre.com](mailto:pan@pantheatre.com)

Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion. James Hillman, Spring Publications, 1985. [www.springpublications.com](http://www.springpublications.com)

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The following are a series of questions and reflections exchanged with Sonu Shamdasani. They make reference to Biodrame, a poem written by Serge Behar, playwright and medical doctor, as well as one of the leading figures in the French Massonic movement at that time (I think this has its importance in terms of **ideas, ideologies and idealisms**).

Dear Sonu, to start: would it be fair to sum up your position by saying that, at least as far as CG Jung and the impact of his work is concerned, much of 20<sup>th</sup> c. psychological thinking, of the psycho-therapeutic or analytical kind, has been caught in the shift from religion to therapy, replacing the enterprise of "saving your soul" with that of "finding your self", and that you are very reserved as to the foundations and implications of this move. You have been heard to say: "I travel light; I have no self", mainly in relation to the right each person has to auto-definition and to the use of constructs such as "soul" or "self" in defining their sense of being and identity. Is this because you consider that the notion of "self" and the operation of "finding one's self" is still somehow within the realm of religion? The question of identity is one of theatre's central "subjects"; in this, like in other areas, theatre reflects and plays with the dominant ideologies of its time, sometimes to perform and sacralize them, sometimes to defy or attack them. Roy Hart's letter is a case in point where the time's major concepts are used, admittedly in a somewhat circular manner, but with a tremendously earnest and dynamic feeling of integrity and altruistic ambition.

Note: it is important here to state that, especially in artists, theory and praxis do not necessarily coincide; an artist can invoke theories that do not do best justice to his or her work. There can be contradictions and even delusions, for instance in terms of inspiration: an artist can attribute his or her inspiration to a false or erroneous source. This happens especially for ideological reasons. It's often the case also in therapy: a therapist's meta-psychological language and declared theoretical systems can be quite outlandish, even irrelevant, while his or her practice is thoroughly grounded and effective. "It works", but not necessarily for the reasons the healer gives. Or maybe "it works" precisely because of the authorities invoked, the diplomas and the masters, but not particularly because of the practice. At the coming July Summer University we will be organizing for instance a seminar with Noah Pikes to discuss the relative influences on Roy Hart's voice work of the ideas and concepts of CG Jung on the one hand, and on the other hand the model of "consciousness" and initiatory teaching of Gurdjieff.

My second preliminary question concerns what I would call the "philosophies of the body". To practitioners, mainly, who claim to "think with their bodies" and who tend to treat the word "intellectual" with a pejorative connotation, you reply by pointing to the wonder and pleasure of the "dance of ideas". We know that discussions opposing "head" and "body" can be terribly sterile, because too often "murderously" opinionated, especially in artistic circles. But let me ask you to venture into it once again, especially in order to tackle the question of "subjectivity".

It seems to me that in Roy Hart's letter there is a claim to objectivity at the core of subjectivity: the thesis being that if, through voice work, you have achieved psychological AND biological self-knowledge, involving the enterprise of control and transformation, you can use and relativize your "subjectivity" and attain something like psychological objectivity. You can say you are transformed or 'evolved' enough to be objective, or at least more objective than the average other (I know this is a tricky question but it must be tackled since it is implicit, and sometimes explicit in Hart's statements.)

In line with the credo of psycho-analysis, you can unmask unavowed subjectivities, your own to begin with, then those of the persons facing you in dialogue, and then those of society at large. The letter mentions this progression from self to other to society as including a project of political commentary and intervention.

Note 1 - Politics enters this scheme through self-knowledge and the control of subjectivities, postulating that one can reach something like an objective voice, and presumably, but much more complicated, an objective vote. This socio-political attitude was quite in vogue during certain periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., especially in artistic circles, and especially in the 1960s and 70s. It claimed that personal and artistic transformation had an impact on the transformation of society. The maxim was: "transform yourself and you will transform the world". This was one of the reasons Roy Hart gave for his performing: to display the achievements of personal experimentation and transformation, and thereby have political impact. His ethical-political argument went something like this: it is not just "what you say", but "who you are" that matters, and that has the real political impact. I.e. The quality of your presence, what was called "embodiment": "Are your ideas embodied?", and ultimately, in the largest sense, "is your "voice" embodied?" (Nota: the value of one's ideas was therefore linked to this notion of "embodiment", which implies that somehow one has 'lived' the ideas in one's 'flesh' as it were; giving 'flesh' is here akin to the bible's "le verbe s'est fait chair" (not sure of the English translation...) And of course, what transforms the "verb" (ideas) into 'flesh' is the voice. One of the most damning judgements at the time was: "your ideas are not embodied" – i.e. you do not 'know' what you are saying ...)

Note 2 – (Note: After a digression on politics and the May 29 French referendum)... I'll close the digression by pointing out, nevertheless, that I consider Hillman's take on CJ Jung's notion of *anima* to be one of the most subtle and insightful psychological renderings of the mechanisms described as *subjectivity*, especially in the interplay between ideas and emotions, the interface between rational passions and manifestations of moods. The notion of *anima* informs and puts into question constructs such as "individuality" and "self", especially when these constructs are loaded with the value of truth: like in "finding one's true self", or acting according to true self... (Hillman: Anima – The Anatomy of a Personified Notion)

But let us return to Roy Hart's more straightforward militant claims that by activating, through the voice, the body's "biodrama" – its emotions, plots and characters - and thanks to what he called the "aural vision" that guided his work, he had reached a higher, or deeper, or more comprehensive (here one is again tempted to say "more objective") degree not only of self-knowledge, but of "control of self" ; this "control" being equated with the project of "transformation". An example he uses in the letter is the "potential for murder" : "Many actors only work on their technical capacity to wear a mask in order to hide the blood red substance which frightens them, but which, in my view, should nourish their performance. I believe it is necessary for the actor to contact in himself this capacity for murder." As you can imagine this claim has crucial implications, for instance for the type of **sounds** involved in the work, let alone for how his peers must have felt at these claims!

What Hart meant by "aural vision" is in my view linked to what I described in an 1984 article in Spring Journal as the "root metaphore" of his voice work, which is quite simply the notion of "singing". In a voice performance, you do not cry a cry, or scream a scream, you 'sing' it. This has to be heard metaphorically, although the singing is also literal, because acted out. Roy Hart's central operating or performative point - inherited to a great degree from his master Alfred Wolfsohn, states with deceptive simplicity (one that can sound almost mystical) : singing is the artistic transformation of sound. Very simple; yet, what idealism! Especially if you think of applying it to psychology or politics! Since Roy Hart's death in 1975,

30 years ago this year, the world has gone through enormous changes and the impact of what has been called the “end of ideologies”, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, has made everyone very wary of idealisms. In the last 30 years there has been much revisioning, criticism, rejection, revivals of what different individuals consider to have been Roy Hart’s legacy. For my part, I find his statements in this letter, once one has relativised the period’s defiant “avant garde” prophetic tone, very touching in its ambitions and generosity. I also find it particularly relevant today: I think our times need a salutary injection of idealistic screaming. I shall return to this in a section entitled “Cri, crise, critique, crime”, of particular importance for someone who is launching a “Voice Performance School”.

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## Reply from Sonu Shamdasani

Email ven. 27/05/2005

1. Self and Soul. I consider the ‘self’ to be basically a soul-concept, and heavily laden with theological baggage, not least of which is dualism. One of my favourite essays is William James’ ‘Does consciousness exist?’ where he writes that consciousness is “the name of the nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumour left behind by the disappearing ‘soul’ upon the air of philosophy.” In terms of the status of the self as articulated in psychology, a critical issue here is the status of psychological language in terms of the general failure of psychology to constitute itself as science or universal discipline. I enclose my last attempt to articulate these issues. In the light of the failure of psychology to establish its concepts as a general ontology, each individual should be free to take up any terms they choose for their experience. In this sense, what I write out about in this piece in terms of ‘non-ontological language’ use could have some connections to theatrical practice - one can animate whatever notions one chooses given that it is not as if there is a real set of notions lying somewhere else. This links what you are saying about artists being able to invoke whatever theories they like to inform their work. My own preference is based on my sense that hermeneutic systems, with their promise of enriching experience, end up impoverishing it. I prefer the richness of the language which already exists. Thus if one speaks of one’s ‘heart’ instead of one’s ‘self’ there is less of a tendency to objectivity the notion and deny its metaphorical character. I spent years thinking my way into so many systems, and then even more years thinking my way out of them, preferring to wake up with less clutter, and less limitation on where my thought might go. There is a line in Nietzsche which goes something like ‘Banish the inner world - there are too many will o’the wisps in it! Thought and sensation are enough for me.’ The question of religion is a trickier. That a number of secular therapies have a soteriological function goes without saying, but I prefer to keep out of the evaluative discussion of therapies, etc. Also, historiographically, there has been a tendency to overplay the secularisation hypothesis - as to what extent what has gone by the name of religion has declined is a moot point.

2. Body. What to say? The Body is an abstract concept. This comes out clearly in Béhar’s Whitmanesque poem, where one finds the somewhat jarring juxtaposition of the valorisation of immediate bodily authentic experience, with biomedical descriptions culled from an physiological text book, which couldn’t be further from any direct experience. Historically speaking, that a revaluation of the body was necessary after the sway of the promoters of the soul or self, goes without saying - and here again, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is the opus classicus. However this still remains within a theological and historical trajectory, which misses possibly the more important target: dualism. Perhaps one could say, if one has ‘got rid’ of the ‘soul’ one needs to get rid of the ‘body’ too? In Béhar’s text, one sees the cult of authenticity switching from the soul to the body. Substitute soul for body and one could be in the realm of Christian mystical ecstasis.

3. Roy Hart’s letter. He speaks here of the existence of a knowledge which one must be in possession of. But what is the status of this knowledge, and why does an actor or politician need it? In the face of this, one wants to celebrate the artifices of the Baroque. In terms of the body, etc, it seems that one of the services of science studies over the last few decades has been to call into question the objectivity traditionally ascribed to such knowledge, and there is good work in the anthropology of medicine which has been relativising the status of biomedicine. The basis of Roy Hart’s claims to objectivity are not clear to me. That he might have obtained a significant self-transformation is one thing, but the claim that this gives skill’s that are transferrable to other spheres of activity is something else. One thing I am wary of is noetic claims of insight based on the attainment of particular states, and the claim that these should be binding on others.