

Letter to SONU SHAMDASANI

On Biodrame

2005

In preparation for the talk "Roy Hart and the Spirit of Singing"

"...the point is that he had a dream which he could demonstrate not with words, but with a demonstration of what dreams are made of - sound."
Paul Silber, from a recent exchange on Roy Hart, May 2013

The following are a series of questions and reflections exchanged with Sonu Shamdasani - historian of psychology and Jung scholar; he is referred to in Pantheatre's Myth and Theatre Festival presentations as a "specialist in pre-Freudian voices", and a "great critic of post-Freudian voices". This exchange makes 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". It is written by Serge Behar, playwright and medical doctor, as well as being 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**). Both Roy Hart's letter and the poem "Biodrame" are available on Paul Silber and Clara Harris' *Roy Hart Archives*. www.roy-hart.com/bio1.htm

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 20th 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 Myth and Theatre Festival, 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 20th 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?”

Note 2 – As I write these lines, France is heading for the May 29 referendum on the European constitution. It is a fascinating political debate, the best I have ever been involved in, mainly because we are not voting for a person, at least in principle, but for a vast geo-political project with long-term implications (not Blair's or Bush's four years.) Yet, ironically, it makes it much more difficult, I would venture to say rationally impossible because it involves too big of a gamble. In France we have a fresh reminder of what catastrophic results rational idealism can lead to: in the recent French elections, the 2001 presidentials, the political naivety of the likes of me were slapped across the face: rational idealism had made us vote Green; Lionel Jospin was eliminated in the first round and we found ourselves with a choice between Chirac and ultra right-wing Le Pen. The European referendum is an instance where I feel that I must have little ‘self-knowledge’ since I am so unclear about my decision – so unconvinced of my own motives ! I feel both sides are right. At the moment I am voting “yes” on the basis of a strange mixture of cynicism and idealism (“it's the best we can get, since we believe in a generous and cultural European project...”). I realize that my decisions are ruled by psycho-emotional impulses, by the acting and activating factors that James Hillman describes when he links the “personified notion” of *anima* with ideals and ideologies, and points to the emotional and therefore mythological cores of ideologies, especially when fired by political passion. This referendum vote is a case where I feel my *anima* is doing the voting, much more so than me, and certainly more than my rationality! As you can see, I do not travel as lightly as you – I seem to carry an *anima* around, and a programme called “rationality”! But this discussion takes us too far away from our ‘subject’; I'll close the digression by pointing out, nevertheless, that I consider Hillman's take on C.J. 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... (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”.