

“Reflections of the Soul in the Spirit of the River”.
Fragments of an ethical discourse between the Ego
and the Self in a context of restricted freedom
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[Received January, 30th, 2019
Accepted for publication February, 19th, 2019]

Abstract

The article describes, from the perspective of analytical psychology, the experience of a body expression workshop conducted by the author in a context of restricted freedom. Gesture is the oldest “word”. Word, not in the sense of *Logos* but rather *Mythos: symbolic word*. The group, through body language, expressed the myth, the symbolic narration which dwelled within it during the here and now of the experience. The restorative function of the transpersonal unconscious mind in relation to the group identity became apparent. The river, as an archetypal image of the spirit mirrored intrinsic value and purity to a conscious which identified itself with shadows of guilt, shame, worthlessness.

Key words: *re-animate, imaginative activity, mythos/symbolic word, body expression, ethical discourse between the Ego and the Self, water symbolism*

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Studi Junghiani (ISSN 1828-5147, ISSN 1971-8411), vol. 25, n. 1, 2019

Riassunto. *“Riflessi d’anima nello spirito del fiume”. Frammenti di un discorso etico tra l’Io e il Sé in una situazione di coercizione della libertà*

L’articolo è l’elaborazione, dal punto di vista della psicologia analitica, di un’esperienza di espressività corporea condotta dall’Autrice all’interno di una situazione di coercizione della libertà. Il gesto è la parola più antica. Parola intesa non come *Logos* ma come *Mythos: parola simbolica*. Il gruppo, tramite il linguaggio del corpo, ha manifestato il mito, la narrazione simbolica, che lo abitava nel qui e ora dell’incontro. È emersa la funzione riparativa dell’inconscio transpersonale rispetto all’assetto della coscienza del gruppo. Il fiume, come immagine archetipica dello spirito, ha rispecchiato valore e purezza originaria a una coscienza identificata con ombre di colpa, vergogna e indegnità.

Parole chiave: *ri-animare, attività immaginativa, mythos/parola simbolica, espressività corporea, dialogo etico tra l’Io e il Sé, simbolismo acquatico*

Prison or Hades. A return to the inner dwelling

Being unable to move freely is the main constraint in prison. Suffering inherent to the trance-inducing state of a total institution. A constraint which provokes that “pain of living” which no prison reform can alleviate. It is this pain which the detainee nurses as he learns to stay there, in his cell and, at the same time, Elsewhere- there where dream and imagination manage to carry him (Curcio, Petrelli, Valentino, 1990, p. 191)¹

There are extreme conditions in life in which the human being is subjected to an environment, whether physical or relational, which is particularly dispossessing and disconfirming; there are life experiences in which psychological pain is overwhelming, and it is difficult to bear the frustration, remain whole and not lose oneself. Prison is one of these conditions, and it is one of these experiences. However, in recent decades, thanks to the 1975 Penitentiary Act important reforms have been brought into being and consequently prison has changed, and so has the concept of punishment.

1. Towards the end of the 1980s, Renato Curcio, Nicola Valentino and Stefano Petrelli, who at that time had been in prison for about a decade, decided to carry out research into the nature of the experience lived by prisoners from a human point of view. Above all, they asked themselves what resources detainees were able to tap in order to survive and resist the humiliating mechanisms which characterize prison life. They collected numerous personal accounts but were unable to find anyone willing to publish the results of this intense and delicate project. So they decided to do it themselves. In 1990 the first publication appeared under the title *Nel bosco di Bistorco* (In Bistorco’s Wood) and the publishing cooperative “Sensibili alle foglie” (Sensitive to leaves)” was born.

Nevertheless, imprisonment is still based on the deprivation of freedom and the removal of the prisoner's subjectivity, which can only be expressed when individual freedom can be fully exercised within a framework of rights and duties. Prison is still an existential condition of suffering.

The 1975 Penitentiary Act was a turning point because it replaced the fascist Penal Code of 1931 once and for all. The latter was based on the belief, in vogue at the time of Italian Unification, that offenders were best re-educated by means of deprivation and physical suffering. Impenetrability and total isolation from society were the fundamental characteristics of a prison system, further confirmed by the architectural structure of the prisons themselves [...]. With the Penitentiary Act (Law n. 354/1975) the long road towards penal reform reached a fundamental milestone: at last, it acknowledged the necessity for the humanity and dignity of the detainee to underpin their treatment (Malinconico, Malorni, 2013, pp. 37-38).

Today, the main aim of the detention period is to re-educate and reintegrate the person into society besides reducing the likelihood of relapse into crime. In addition, detainees have acquired the right to be able to care for their body, mind and spirit.

The application of these criteria requires a systematic and widespread collaboration between the "social sciences" and the prison service to be in place. In fact, Art. 80 states that "for the conduct of observation and treatment activities, the Prison Administration may employ professionals experienced in psychology, social work, pedagogy, psychiatry and clinical criminology" (*ibidem*, p. 38).

So the law has changed, there is greater osmosis between inside and out, and, at least in theory, inmates can take advantage of services, medical care, opportunities for personal development and growth. Much of this is offered by voluntary associations who by sustaining and taking an interest in the inmates through various creative and psycho-pedagogical activities bring "soul" back into prisons.

The Prison Management System has less difficulty accepting and collaborating with requests to carry out research into prison life and transformative projects for the mental well-being of detainees. It even opens the door to depth psychology: the unconscious goes beyond the bars and overcomes initial prejudices; even detainees are allowed to have psychological complexities and the chance to change. The life of the psyche is re-animated, the mythopoetic function which, from the point of view of Jung's analytical psychology, constitutes the transformative language of images, is facilitated and activated².

2. For further reading, we recommend the aforementioned work by Angelo Malinconico and Nicola Malorni, *Psiche mafiosa*, (Mafia Psyche), 2013. The authors conducted innovative

However, you only have to walk into a prison as a simple visitor to become immediately aware of how much tension, anguish and suffering permeates the environment, an anguish so deep that the visitor experiences a sense of regression and feels surrounded by an aura of death. Because the deprivation of one's liberty is inevitably a deprivation of life.

When you go through the prison gate for any reason, whether as a volunteer, doctor, teacher, psychotherapist, all your points of reference change: the loss of freedom, the security system by which one becomes just a small part of the institution, the meagre certainties one leaves at the entrance, the document which says who you are, your identity card a real symbol, handing over your mobile phone produce an instantaneous loss of self [...] what you see is impressed on you and makes you a part of that "awareness of suffering" which leaves its mark forever. Your world from that moment on is "other", and even if you know you can leave...once you have finished your activity [...] something inside you changes. The Shadow does not let you go...when the eyes of those you have been with stop seeing you [...] they do not stop looking at you in the dark, they wander restless in the night, in your dreams (Ravasi Bellocchio, 2013, pp. 9-10).

As in any total institution, day-to-day life in prisons is entirely permeated by a system of rules that control its every manifestation. The architectural structures of prisons are determined by this need to isolate and control; they are oppressive, depressing cloisters and bunkers. "The impenetrability of the place" and "isolation from society" create a complex, claustrophobic world in which moments when energy stagnates alternate with moments when it explodes.

Even if it has benefited from a process resulting in more humane treatment which mitigates its violent aspects, the prison system is still a place, both real and phantasmal, of detention, exclusion, isolation from the world, from human society. Identity is hot-branded with a sense of rejection: a sense of unworthiness floods the inner world regardless of any mask of toughness, indifference, invulnerability which could mislead those with whom they come into contact.

The myth which lurks in the background and which comes to life in the psyche of whoever dwells there whether prisoners or prison officers, is of an infernal nature and can be represented symbolically as "Hades" or as a Dantesque hell.

In ancient Greece, Hades was the name of the god of darkness and death and by analogy of the pagan underworld. It is the kingdom of darkness, of

research in the field of Jung's analytical psychology using "images" to work on the psyche and in particular introducing "sand play techniques" as an expressive and transformative opportunity for a specific group of people imprisoned for crimes connected with the mafia.

shadows, of everything which disintegrates, which defies consciousness or which has never had access to consciousness – all that is rejected, delegitimized by individual and collective consciousness.

Prison is a Hades. Crossing its threshold is like dying to the eyes of the world yet you are still alive. Alive but surrounded by insurmountable walls: “walled in alive”. It’s “the other world”, as opposed to the world of the living, where being deprived of light, symbolically, is equivalent to being deprived of sight, life and freedom. Deprived, therefore, of the possibility of seeing and being seen. If the Italian expression “come to the light of day” is synonymous with being born, the loss of light becomes synonymous with death. You no longer see the world and the world no longer sees you. And this is the first form of deprivation: the only eyes which see you are there to monitor, control, the caring gaze of the “other”, “mother”, “father”, “brother” is gone. Without mutual gaze, without looking into each other’s eyes, the sense of belonging is lost and with it the very sense of existence.

The dividing line between inside and out is very marked as it is between the world of the living and the world of the dead. A question frequently asked by detainees: “*What’s happening outside?*”.

The sense of life in prison is always experienced as “something distant”, a “glimmer” which glistens beyond the bars in the images of the world still visible though inaccessible: life is in the snippets extracted from the deafening background noise, from the heavy silence of imprisonment, or from the metallic routine of the same gestures day after day always the same, the deafening silence of the voices which shout orders and reprimands or which burst from the burial niches aka cells. They are snippets gleaned from beyond the bars: the top of a tree swaying in the wind, the flight of a flock of birds which captures your gaze and carries it away, a cat meowing on a roof.

When the house we inhabit, whether a concrete external container or a relational system, proves both mortifying and deadly, the chance to access an inner dwelling provides salvation: the dwelling of the Self can open its doors to us. And it is good for a person to know that they can count on this, as they hope and strive to make their environment more humane. The “inner dwelling” can be a source of new strength and ideas, not just to survive but to live.

It is commonly thought that it is better not to activate the psyche in a context of coercion because it would fuel tension between possibility and impossibility. It would fuel desire and repression. This is not right and it is not true. *Why, then, animate life in prison?*

A nauseating paralysis. A sense of disgust which overcomes you when the desire for action and life is obstructed by rules and walls. Thea – like all detainees –

suffered because of this need to communicate life which bubbles inside but which cannot become social through action. Yes. This is the boredom which gnaws at you. The boredom which kills but at the same time keeps you alive. Tea overcame boredom by writing – helped in this by a doctor who collected her notebooks. One day she wrote: “*I haven’t lost myself in boredom for many years now only because you told me and you keep telling me: ‘write and I’ll keep your writings for you’, But all, all those people who have been locked up for years use their wits to find ways to relieve somehow the lava of suffering*” (Curcio, Petrelli, Valentino, 1990, “Testimonianza di Tea”, “Tea’s story”, p. 165).

A human being has a fundamental need to express himself, regardless of any utilitarian purpose and regardless of any legitimizing confirmation in the eyes of the other. Expression is a manifestation of the self, in all its authenticity, its essence, its soul. At times, it is a revelation of the Self which, through the self, manifests itself. We distinguish, therefore, between the “self” on the one hand, as a coherent, cohesive perception in space and time, of one’s psycho-physical identity with all that characterizes its subjectivity and, on the other hand, the “Self”, a key concept in transpersonal analytical psychology, used to express the referential sense of universal totality for Ego-consciousness, as a collection of all the psyche’s potentialities to which the individual, with his subjectivity relates (the Ego-Self axis).

Being seen and seeing means life with the other. And when it happens it is a marvellous experience. Trying to transform a “Hades” into a “Hermitage”, where it is possible to turn the life of one’s psyche into an opportunity for mutual mirroring, even if in small, intimate groups, is a kind of return to life and a prelude to rebirth. Expression means bringing out, manifesting the emotional content which dwells within our inner world, the “phantasms”, in a psychological sense, which animate the inner life in the here and now and which are present in our interactions with others but which can be neither thought nor expressed verbally, because language is often incapable of capturing depth, complexity, the inexpressible; if they have no opportunity to take on a form, to become an image, phantasms take other symptomatic or somatic routes to communicate with Ego-consciousness. They become enactments rather than actions, symptoms rather than representations, concrete manifestations rather than symbols. The psyche naturally tends to express itself using a symbolic language appropriate to the subject who uses it, to whom it also corresponds and responds.

The unconscious tends to reveal itself by creating images which radiate transformative meanings and ideas. The elaborations between image and ego-consciousness which take place within the psyche can lead, *deo concedente*, to awareness and change.

If it is true then that “*all the people who have been locked up for years use their wits to find ways of easing the lava of suffering*”, the role of psychotherapeutic activities in prison should essentially consist in facilitating a free, unconstrained representation of emotions and affections; it should facilitate the psyche’s mythopoetic function so that *that lava*, that magmatic content finds a way to assume a form which can be reflected in the other’s eyes and which can be recognized and shared, outside the individual’s emotional isolation.

Processes leading to transformation, growth and maturation which analytical intervention can help to trigger in the subconscious of individuals or groups require a “sufficiently empty space” within which phantasies, images, dreams and emotions can be expressed freely without censure and without inhibition. We believe, therefore, in the possibility of activating, through the generation of images, that curiosity and creativity which overcome the intellectual barriers dominating the tendency to understand, explain, define, interpret (Malinconico, Malorni, 2013, pp. 54-55).

A certain resistance does not depend only on intellectual barriers but also on super-egoic barriers based on the idea that growing up and becoming adults means an end to play. Play is sublimated into artistic activity – an exclusive domain of the chosen few.

The task of the psychotherapist is to propose, in a sufficiently empty space, which is free and at the same time safe, stimuli and techniques to “animate” play, creativity and the perceptive, sensory, emotional sensitivity of both the body and the soul, transcending for a moment the mental, verbal area which is in tune more with cultural models than with the universal foundations of human life. We know that prison is inhabited by a variety of people of different cultures, social conditions, languages, countries of origin, age etc...so it is not only useful but necessary to activate a universal lexis.

In accordance, then, with what Malinconico and Malorni maintain as regards work with images carried out by the psyche, we believe that:

The image used in play is as important for us as the oneiric image in analysis. Indeed, the “body which plays” in the analyst’s room [...] is not the vehicle for enactments, but *the place from which the incessant imaginative activity of the subconscious originates* (*ibidem*, p. 58).

The place from which the incessant imaginative activity of the subconscious originates, this is the inner dwelling to which we return.

There is a Greek goddess, Hestia, who expresses the psychic nature of

this profound inner intimacy, this part of the soul which constitutes a centre and a centering, a dwelling within each personality³.

Hestia has no iconography, no physiognomy or face, as though it were impossible to portray her. But she is represented by a symbol: her symbol was the circle, a circular space which defines a boundary in the midst of chaotic infinity and initiates an inclusive, gathering movement; her energy springs from the flames in the circular hearth situated in the centre of the dwelling, and in the round fire pit found in the temple of every divinity.

As her place is at the center of the dwelling, Hestia must be central for the life of the psyche; and as she is closely connected to the center, centrality must be a feature of her realm (Kirksey, 1988, pp. 45-46).

Hestia is the inner dwelling to which we return when we feel lost or when we feel a sense of panic, of loss of self and of our identity, when we lose our equilibrium and feel unsettled, ill at ease. It is an energetic center where we receive/embrace and repair the damaged, disunited parts of our psyche in exactly the same way as when we gather around a fire to warm ourselves, to sleep, to dream, to tell stories. Hestia is the inner dwelling and its hearth. When life becomes a Hades it is possible to find salvation by returning to the dwelling of Hestia.

She is one of the goddesses of the earth, an archetype of the Great Mother but we are not talking about a mother who embraces to console, protect, alleviate distress and heal wounds. The embrace of Hestia is neither consolatory nor merciful. These fundamental aspects of the maternal archetype do not belong to Hestia. She is not the Mother of *Pietas*. She does not medicate wounds, rather she opens them, she throws light on and examines them.

This way of becoming aware allows us to connect to that inner fire, the source of the imaginal activity of the psyche: this in turn facilitates a centering and an equilibrium, fruit of the interplay between the Ego and the images. The heat which emanates from this fire is not of a generic emotional nature but is more specifically vital because it breathes life into the activity of the

3. Hestia, goddess of the home and the hearth, is one of the least known divinities from ancient Greece. Nevertheless, she was highly respected and received the first offering during domestic sacrifices. She was the first born daughter of Cronus and Rhea and her siblings in order of birth are: Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon and Zeus. She belonged therefore to the small group of the twelve major Olympian gods. Like her Roman counterpart, Vesta, she was not the subject of myths and she was rarely represented by painters or sculptors with a human form as she did not have distinctive features: her importance lay in rituals involving fire. She made a vow of chastity, like the vestal virgins who kept alight the sacred fire of Vesta, the Roman version of Hestia. Indeed, Homer narrates that Hestia manages to resist the seductions of Aphrodite.

psyche – it re-animates. It is a mother who activates the dream-life of the psyche. The *reverie*.

Hestia, is at the same time both the physical dwelling with its external walls and its very heart where the “living fire” burns, as Ovid writes in the *Fasti* «the incessant imaginative activity of the subconscious”: it is the inner space of the psyche which “grants the soul an abode» (*ibidem*, p. 48). And the possibility for expression. «Her role, in the soul, is one of cohesion, a role which preserves that element of wholeness which enables the individual to imagine “in peace”» (*ibidem*, p. 52).

The setting which we arrange around the fire of the analytical relationship or the environment which we build, in our case, within the prison walls, mirrors Hestia’s role; when we arrange a space-time context where it is possible to let oneself go in imaginal play, “to catch fire” so to speak, using whatever technique is possible, we are building an abode for Hestia.

If Hestia is the source of images, her ever-burning fire enables the images to be illuminated and put into focus. In Hestia’s style, putting a phantasm from the psyche into focus from different points of view means being able to imagine and recognize it wherever it is projected and being able to represent the psychological drama it is part of: «it is the process of focalization which leads the individual in a well-defined interaction with the image, an interaction which enables the image to become increasingly bright and sharp» (*ibidem*, pp. 55-56).

Returning to the inner dwelling, to Hestia, is not, as far as prison is concerned an escape, an illusory flight of the mind seeking to escape from a dehumanising reality into a virtual world, an artificial Paradise as opposed to the Hell of Hades.

It is, on the contrary, a move back to oneself, a centering on the Self, which can and must be carried out with those sharing the same destiny: it is a movement towards an internal-external collection point where it is possible to “dream together” , and receive images which rise up from the depths of the individual or group subconscious to be illuminated and illuminating, to converse with the consciousness of each dreamer.

Body expression workshop

I want to think of the heart you have while you dance, and lower your arms and lift your head as if to give yourself completely to the air. That heart I seek [...] (Salvatore Quasimodo, Love Letters to Maria Cumani, 1936-1959).

“*Dancing with my heart, talking with my body*”. These were the expressions used by the female prisoners to describe the psychological experience

offered by the Body Expression Workshop conducted by Simona Massa in a prison and elaborated within the Aphrodite Group⁴.

In a context of restricted liberty, a special kind of freedom was experienced – the possibility to give form and life to the postures, gestures and movements imprisoned deep within our psyche. We are talking about expressive animation springing from the relation between psyche and soma. Gesture is the most ancient “word”. Word not in the sense of *Logos* but rather *Mythos*: *symbolic word*. The group, through body language, expressed the myth, the symbolic narration which dwelled within it during the here and now of the experience.

In his essay *Die Sprache als Mythos* the philologist Walter Friedrich Otto (1874-1958) pointed out that in ancient Greek two distinct linguistic expressions *mythos* and *logos* are used to indicate “word”, not as synonyms but as expressing two separate meanings of the word itself: *Vox* indicates word as vocal sound; *logos* is word as an expression of thought, rational and reasonable; *mythos*, a more archaic term, implies word as immediate manifestation of what was, is and will be, a self-revelation of being [...]. *Mythos* is, therefore, *the true word* not in the sense of what is thought correctly, based on empirical experience, but rather in the sense of what is given as fact, revealed, consecrated: in this sense it is different from every other enunciation [...]. So what is this truth? [...] Exactness and inexactness are thought procedures [...]. *In a higher and primary meaning, “truth” means knowledge which eludes the analysis of logical thought and experiment and wishes to reveal itself autonomously. This truth reveals itself in forms which can be images or – in a far more original way – in the representation of existence. Not only can it reveal itself in this way, it must. The need to represent itself in images belongs to the essence of this truth, to its creative being. This is its distinctive characteristic* (Otto, 1962, pp. 32-36 of the Italian edition)⁵.

During the Workshop, sensorial, emotional and ideational stimuli activate experiences within the psyche, in an emotional context dominated by death

4. The “Aphrodite Group” was founded in 2011 by a few Jungian analysts (AIPA, IAAP) from the Tuscan Section of the Associazione Italiana di Psicologia Analitica. The group researches into themes related to the individuation process of Femininity/. Emphasis is put on the individuation, in the Jungian sense, of gender identity subjected to pressures from collective opinion, which induce women to align their femininity on the basis of partial, alienating stereotypical images. The results of the research carried out by the Aphrodite Group have been published in the house journal of the Tuscan Section of AIPA “E-venti” and concern the pathological effects of maternal narcissism on the daughter’s identity, the question of power in the father-daughter relationship and the value of the beauty of the soul in the world (Convegno “The seed of beauty”, Florence, Biblioteca delle Oblate, 24th January 2015 – proceedings published in E-venti n.2, 2015). At the conference “The Ethics of Alterity” (Florence, Biblioteca delle Oblates, 30th January 2016) the Aphrodite Group presented the experience of the Body Expression Workshop conducted by Simona Massa in a prison and subsequently published in the house journal of the Tuscan section of AIPA. (E-venti, n.4, “Etica dell’Alterità”, 2017).

5. For further information refer to the essay by W. F. Otto (1962) “Die Sprache als Mythos”, in *Mythos und Welt*.

anxieties. Imprisonment is one of the possible forms of death. In the same way, “non-life” is the automatic defence mechanism which is activated in order to survive despite the deprivations inherent in the prison system⁶.

The aim, therefore, was to achieve an experience which was not a manic compensation for depressive anxiety but rather an authentic manifestation of the imaginative life of the psyche expressed bodily by the participants: a play zone, neither intellectual nor subject to judgment, to facilitate the representation of the themes which emerge in the group and which can be recognized, mirrored and elaborated.

As Jung states (see in particular Jung 1916/1958): «The aim is to allow the imagination to run free [...]. This makes the formation of a concrete or symbolic expression of one’s mood possible, thus bringing the latter to consciousness and making it more understandable. Even at this stage, the procedure already has a revitalizing effect» (Shamdasani, 2010, p. 209).

During the Workshop imaginal experiences are created through activities involving body movement. They are not standardized movements but on the contrary free and spontaneous movements which have nothing to do with aesthetics or the idea of a final performance but rather with the expressive intensity of emotional content, the *phantasm* which from the inner world, from the individual or group subconscious searches for a form in which to represent itself.

Paraphrasing Pirandello, in the same way that “characters in search of an author” exist – not authors in search of a character, as we often mistakenly believe – so too do phantasms which “long for” a psychic representation, which “long” to channel their energies into a symbolic image rather than into a pathogenic materialization.

In the workshop we try to facilitate this expressive movement by, first of all, dismantling all the inhibitory protective armour resulting from education and cultural paradigms and then animating group phantasy using external stimuli; exactly like when a child during psychotherapy chooses from among the toys-objects which the therapist provides, the object which, in the here and now of the session, calls him emotionally and connects symbolically with his inner world.

In the same way, the psychotherapist, in the workshop with the female prisoners, has provided a series of stimuli to trigger the imagination.

6. In prison there can be a “manic reaction” to death anxiety which pervades everyone, both prisoners and prison officers, by proposing a number of creative and recreational activities which seek to offset the feeling of emptiness and non – sense which pervades the emotional atmosphere. On the other hand, the activities and the voluntary associations which generally offer them have the particular psychological and social function of bringing elements of soul into an emotional context rooted in the deprivation and alienation of the individual and consequently in expressive aridity.

In this case, Haiku, short, incisive poems in the traditional Japanese style offered one of these stimuli. The psychotherapist had chosen an illustration to accompany each Haiku in order to enhance its evocative power and increase the sensory channels providing stimuli; in addition, she avoided total reliance on the written word even if in poetry words lose their ideational content to become images in their own right. The detainees immersed themselves in the chosen images, in their emotional tones, expressing with their body the latent drama which had been activated by the images.

So, by inventing gestures and movements spontaneously, “we give body”, our own body, to the sensorial thoughts, the emotions, the images which either emerge from the group’s psychic field, in the *here and now* of the experience, or which, “chosen” from the external world, move and engage the participants. Subsequently, by refining the gestures we obtain narrative sequences which can be defined as “living poems” or “dancing poems” to underline the activation of a group soul⁷.

Representing Haiku with gesture and movement

Wandering in a silent night / Without going anywhere / Around, around, around and around like a little moon [...] (Moto Takahashi, 2015, Japanese dancer and choreographer).

It is difficult to realize how surreal a prison is until you go inside. Everything is real and tangible and yet it does not belong to reality. It’s metaphysical. You go inside and you seem to cross a border, customs control, you’re in another world, where everything has a different logic...

I’m in the female wing⁸. We’re all sitting in a circle. I’m holding my illustrated book of Haiku. The women had been enthusiastic about them last time we met. I try to propose the emotional representation of a Haiku. I turn the pages, read, explain what it’s about, then I say that I don’t want to bore them with too many words. *Dora* tells me she wants to know what a Haiku is because when she leaves prison it could be useful for her.

They choose and agree upon this first Haiku...

«You’ve chosen this picture and these lines, now let’s try to hear, inside ourselves, if they convey something to us, and let’s try to evoke a gesture. It doesn’t have to be a gesture which describes or imitates, it can be any gesture which you feel corresponds in some way, even if we don’t understand at once why».

7. The activity of “soul- making” mentioned by J. Hillman in his works.

8. The names of the female inmates have been changed to maintain anonymity.



*Daffodils, crocuses
and wild violets,
carry me.
If you can.*

Haiku of Simona Massa Ope, Watercolor of Paola Di Girolamo

Magda says the wild violets remind her of her homeland, her woods... The others nod, they say they can smell the daffodils and the strong scent of the violets, they say it's wonderful to think of the flowers, the scent, the woods... I feel their expressions are inspired.

«I'll read them to you and I'll read them slowly...there's no hurry... let's get inside our emotions».

Zahara says goodbye abruptly and goes away.

I'm sorry, I tell her she can come back when she wants.

The others are engrossed, their eyes are closed, they are listening to the words of the Haiku...I haven't proposed an experience of this type with them before, it's the first time, I'm careful not to suggest any gesture, it would be a serious interference on my part, they mustn't imitate choreographically, they must evoke a gesture of their own, let themselves go...I am also tense for fear that nothing happens and that the experience proves itself frustrating and without sense. On the contrary, a little miracle takes place.

I turn towards *Dora*. I see that she is opening her right hand in front of her mouth with her palm upwards and she starts to blow on it softly. We watch her without saying anything, we feel that this gesture is both fitting and beautiful. I repeat it, we all repeat it together over and over again. The group has accepted that gesture, and we begin to talk about that movement...

«It's the flowers which blow a long way towards someone, it's their scent...it's their scent and our scent - I say - we are the flowers...».

Then the gesture evolves, another detail is added...*Magda* blows on her open palm and stretches her arm out in front of her...then she brings it back to herself and rests her open palm on her throat; the movement is slow and

circular, soft and inspired, a scented whiff which comes and goes...I continue reading: «*Daffodils, crocuses and wild violets, carry me, if you can...*».

The gesture expands with another movement, now both hands take part and join at the throat, and suddenly all arms open up in front of us with a sweeping gesture...We repeat the sequence all together: blowing softly, stretching our arms out in front of us towards someone, returning to the source of breath and then the sweeping gesture away from us with our arms which then return locked in a symbolic embrace...I ask them if they feel the need to add something. *Dora* says: «*No, no, it's all right like this*». So I say: «*This is our Haiku*», and we carry on representing it.

We are happy. The words which comment the gestures come from me, from them spontaneously...*We emanate a scent, something comes back to us in our breath and so we can share what we have received and embrace all flowers, the world.*

Someone says: «*They are our thoughts which come and go, the thoughts of our heart*».

It's a small delirium which in that moment makes a lot of sense to us...*Mei* says it all reminds her of her childhood back home, when she was little and sometimes happy.

The group chooses a second Haiku...



*The hour snaps,
alone, along the
river.
Nobody's there.*

Haiku of Simona Massa Ope, Watercolor of Paola Di Girolamo

I think they have chosen a sad Haiku, after the flowers, woods and scents...I say there's a lot of loneliness in these words and in this picture. But unexpectedly *Magda* remarks: «*It isn't true that there's nobody...there's the river*».

Everyone says: «*Yes! Yes!*», and someone suggests the movement of the water. They move their hands, their fingers in front of them like light butterflies to simulate the water of the river rippled by a light breeze... They seem satisfied with the movement... I continue to read the lines slowly... Then suddenly, one by one, they cover their heads with a veil, they each take a veil and put it on their head... I just remark that we all have our head covered by a veil... and *Dora* adds: «*Of course, the veil represents solitude*». «*Yes – I say – it's the isolation of solitude, separation from the world, from the others...*». It's perfect.

Lubiana says: «*Now I can see my reflection in the water*».

Everyone looks at their reflection in the water of the river and carries on moving their hands like the wings of a butterfly. I say that the river reflects our images in the deep water, it reflects a deep image of ourselves, in solitude we come to know ourselves, our inner beauty.

Magda tells the group: «*All this isn't make-believe, it's true...*».

It's time to stop. I tell them that they have offered precious pearls about themselves, that they have shown considerable sensitivity of expression... they are happy, they thank me, they ask me if I'll return to "teach" these things. «*Of course, next Tuesday... we'll do more things together*». They go away. *Mei* returns to embrace me.

The following week the atmosphere is heavier, there are some dark waters in the group. They arrive one by one. *Mei* sits down, but while we are waiting for the others, she goes away saying she doesn't feel well...*Magda* arrives slowly, depressed. They had made a mistake, they had told her there was the English course and she wasn't interested. She's elderly and she isn't interested in learning English, she has to spend the next 10 years in prison anyway... *Lubiana* arrives and then *Dora*. They tell me the others have been transferred to another prison and we won't see them again. We all feel as if we are hanging by a thread, there's a very high level of frustration to overcome... *Dora* tells me they were looking forward to our workshop and then adds that *Zahara* is a jerk because the other time she only came to see what it was about and criticize, «*Zahara says we do childish things*».

I tell her I think she was very curious rather than critical and that we need to stay open to the possibility that she might have second thoughts. I suggest we start, I have to fight against this stagnant energy which makes me want to give up.

The river reflects our inner beauty

A poppy dwells amongst the grassy meadows sporting sumptuous bright red gowns of silk with elegant nonchalance [...] it was beyond doubt that that creature was expressing herself and it was beyond doubt that her form, her colours, her graceful movements, served no purpose other than to express her being [...]. In the desert and in the silence, in the midst of things built to serve a purpose, estranged and speechless in their continuous serving, a flower tells of being, of the glory of being (Vitale, 2001, pp. 238-239).

«Last time we represented two Haiku we liked a lot, using gesture. In particular, we said we would continue working on this: “The hour snaps, alone, along the river. Nobody’s there”. Today the river answers us with the words of the song You are so beautiful (Joe Cocker, 1974): “You are so beautiful, you’re everything I hope for, you’re everything I need”.

Now we are each going to take a veil and imagine that the rectangular floor of the gym is the bed of a flowing river. The river speaks to each one of us and we listen to its words and reply with our movements... The veil is whatever we want it to be, air, water, your beauty, breath... When the music finishes take up a position of your choice».

I throw myself into the river too. The visualization of this Haiku had been so touching, last time: *Magda*, despite the context of total solitude and isolation from the rest of the world, had sensed a strong presence of the river. So I felt the need to pick up on this and propose the experience of its voice speaking to us... I realize that we are activating a kind of “*active imagination*”, but something is unfolding in the group and I have the role of *medium*.

They stop at the end of the music, I notice in particular *Magda* who is against the wall in a corner with her arms stretched up. «*Magda, give me a word*», I ask. «*Tree – she replies – I’ve become a tree*».

She looks out of the window of the gym, in the distance the tops of some trees can be seen, *Magda* points them out to us and calls them “*her trees*” and says that in the morning, when she wakes up in her cell, she always looks at them. In this image, I sense nostalgia for a life which is a long way away but still visible.

Dora exclaims: «*Sun! Sun!*». *Kathya* declares: «*I danced with the moon*», *Cristina* says: «*Air! I felt air*».

Immediately after this, we dance to a lively piece of music with veils full of colourful butterflies, “*We are butterflies*”, I say, but I realize that we are shifting towards heady movement, defensive in terms of the present mood; and indeed it’s as if this experience hadn’t left any trace apart from sensorial ones in the beauty of the coloured veils... It’s as if we’d been distracted from the initial theme.

We sit round in a circle, I feel I have to stop and work with what has emerged without following the programme I had prepared, for fear of emptiness... My motto has become: *Defining impedes becoming*. But I have to withstand a big dose of *non sense* and at the same time let myself go, trust in the capacity of the psyche for self-determination, its faculty to germinate in speech and to improvise with what emerges in the here and now.

The women sit down and begin to voice their anxieties...nothing to do with butterflies!

Magda: «*In a fortnight I've got my trial, I'll know how long I have to stay in here... and how much time I still have to live out there*».

Dora and *Kathya* nod and say their cases will be heard in a week's time: «*It's better to know what will become of us...*».

I feel my stomach muscles tighten. One woman says they mustn't think about this now, but use the workshop as a diversion... I am worried, I'm afraid that defining the workshop as an escape is dangerous and belies the inner speech of the psyche which is appearing in visions: at the same time I can't let the group be flooded by anxieties which could paralyse emotional life.

This morning *Magda* is different, she's subtly provocative towards me, a barely perceptible subterranean nuance but it's there, I feel it...to the extent that *Dora* tries to defend the meaning behind what we are doing...The group is suspended in a limbo, I feel it, we are a little island of nothing. *Kathya* is summoned by a prison officer, we watch her move away with a sense of loss... I feel that I need to shake myself... So I say that we all have worries and they can't be denied, they're part of us but we can take our distance from them, look at them, keep them with us, but at the same time concentrate on what we are doing, like a painting with an image which stands out against the background; both are equally important, the image and the background. So now we work with the words which have emerged from the dance with the river... we hope that *Kathya* will come back soon, but in the mean time we work...

«*What's your word?*», *Magda* asks me.

«*Sparks*», I say...

«*I don't like that, it's not suitable, in water there can be bubbles, why do you see fire?*».

She laughs, she says I make her think of those little candles on birthday cakes which never go out, the more you blow the more they light up... those are sparks... everyone smiles and looks at me uncertain...

I feel I mustn't change my word and at the same time I need to stay in touch with her. We must not be at loggerheads. I say that my sparks come from the sun which is reflected on the surface of the water and creates a play of light, fragments of light reflected in the water... *Magda* is silent, the others

nod, I continue... *Kathya* has come back, she attunes to us at once. I ask each one to give me a phrase, just one phrase which contains their chosen word.

Dora starts: «*Come, sun, shine in my heart*».

Kathya: «*In the moonlight the flowers open and close...*».

Cristina: «*The air caresses my skin, lovingly...*».

Magda: «*The tree gives me life with its green leaves, rustled by the breeze...*».

I conclude: «*In the sparkling water / dazzled by the sun / my beauty is reflected...*».

I read the sequence of lines out loud trying to give meaning and feeling to the words.

They look at me amazed: «*It's a poem!*» they remark in wonder. «*Yes, it's the first poem of our group...*».

Gestures, one by one they find appropriate gestures. *Kathya* makes a beautiful movement... «*The flowers let themselves go in the moonlight as if they were going to open completely*», she opens her arms and throws her head back, eyes closed, «*and then they close up again*», she twists her hands together as though she were tightening something...

We are in a circle. Sequence of movements: arms summoning the sun, flowers letting themselves go, hands joining, the right hand stretches out towards the face of the person next to us to caress – *Dora* has suggested the group's first relational gesture – then arms are raised and sway in the breeze; hands fly like butterflies on the surface and I suggest the movement of gathering water from the river to wet our faces, because the river floods us with its deep waters full of our own beauty.

While we act out our living poem I repeat the lines out loud...

Cristina tells me she feels wonderful, at peace...

I remark that we don't have a title for the poem. They suggest the words that come to mind and I take notes: *soul, feeling, river, reflections*. They talk about it together, they quarrel, they exclude feeling, *Kathya* suggests *spirit*, *Magda* protests thinking it implies something religious, *Kathya* looks at me uncertainly, I say that *spirit* doesn't always have to be interpreted as in religion, *Kathya* says she meant breath, I say *breath of life, pneuma*...

Magda nods and I put their words together to compose the title: *Reflections of the Soul in the Spirit of the River*.



Photograph by Camilla Albini Bravo

The psychological core of the experience

The narrative sequence we have represented concerns an *ethical dialogue*, as its aim is restorative, between the group Ego and an image which recalls the archetype of the Self in its spiritual pole. In this experience a self-healing process of the Self⁹ has been activated in the part of the psyche area pertaining to a person's value and sense of existence.

The archetype of the Spirit has constellated in the group in the image of a river, a metaphor for life which continues to flow despite the climate of stagnated energy caused by the prison context. The river speaks to each one of them, locked in the deprivation of the other's gaze, like an *Alterity* which comes from deep within, and compensates for the non-value with which the prisoners are identified, offering them instead value, meaning, and expressive freedom: *You are in any case "beautiful and precious" regardless of the guilt and shame which the world has heaped on you, not because you are perfect, but because you are one of the possible manifestations of Totality.*

9. On this subject, see the essay by Brigitte Allain-Duprè (2015) "At the origins of beauty. The wonder in the gazes shared by mother and new-born baby", in which the author analyses the relationship between Jung as a child and his mother, on a transgenerational scale, and suggests that the Self compensated for the lack of reflection in his mother's eyes locked in a mournful depression due to the repeated loss of dear ones, and that this enabled the young Jung to gain access to the dimension of beauty and creativity.

The prisoners themselves chose the picture of the river from among a wide selection of pictures offered by the psychotherapist. In particular, they were shown a series of Haiku accompanied by an image: a composition of a picture and poetry. The group were drawn to the symbol of the river spontaneously and unanimously. There was a convergence of desire on this kind of representation. In this case the symbolic constellation of the group occurred thanks to an external stimulus. What takes place is an encounter between the external stimulus and the group soul which projects itself and materializes in the chosen picture.

One of the many forms of the symbolic cosmogony of water is present in the image of the river.

Mircea Eliade (Eliade, 1948) in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* devotes a chapter to water and the symbolism which surrounds it.

It is interesting to note that the symbolic essence of water, described by the Author, corresponds to the way in which the spirit of the river mirrors with a legitimizing embrace the group identity of the detainees: an identity which is deeply damaged, delegitimized, corrupt and wicked in the eyes of the world. The shared experience of salutary acceptance and reparation, expressed in the union of the voice of the river with the spontaneous dance of the detainees, corresponds to the universal idea that water symbolizes the totality of virtuality, the origin of every form of existence. In it everything lives in potency and everything dissolves into the pre-formal undifferentiated state. It is the origin of death and rebirth, creation and destruction, preceding new creation. A universal womb where everything and everyone can see their reflection, for better or for worse, for right and for wrong. And everything can be regenerated: «Every contact with water implies regeneration; on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other, because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential for life and creation» (Eliade, 1948, pp. 188-189).

[...] water absorbs evil, thanks to its capacity to assimilate and disintegrate all forms... in water everything *dissolves*, every *form* disintegrates, everything that has happened ceases to be, nothing that existed before remains after immersion in water, no outline, no *sign*, no *event*. Immersion is equivalent, at the human level, to death, and at the cosmic level, it is equivalent to cataclysm (the Flood) which periodically dissolves the world into the primeval ocean. Breaking up all forms, wiping out the past, water possesses this capacity for purification, regeneration and rebirth; because what is immersed in it *dies*, and, rising again from the water, is like a child without any sin or any past, able to receive a new revelation and begin a new and *real* life. [...]. Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past and restores – if only for a moment – the integrity of the dawn of things (*ibidem*, pp. 194-195)¹⁰.

10. Please refer to the entire chapter “Waters and aquatic symbolism”, pp.188-215.

We can hypothesize that the experience of body expression may have triggered a regressive process in the group, beyond the physical and psychic womb of each detainee's own mother, towards the universal womb represented by water and, in particular, by the archetypal image of the river whose energy has symbolic, spiritual meaning. Like a Ganges, the sacred river which receives the souls of the living and the dead and, as it flows, leads everything to a rebirth. And to spiritual elevation¹¹.

Pina Bausch said: «*When there are no words to express what you feel, dance*» (Wenders, 2011), that is, go back to the primeval language of the body, to the liquid, flowing movements of dance, which is, far more than conscious languages, in contact with the knowledge nestling in the unconscious.

(Translation by Maria O'Reilly)

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11. Hindus believe that by bathing in the sacred river, called Ganga, personification of the celestial god of water, it is possible to gain forgiveness for the sins committed during life, recovery from illnesses and salvation of the soul. People travel long distances to immerse their bodies or the ashes from their cremated relatives in the waters of the Ganges in the belief that this ritual can help the soul to ascend to heaven.