

## The Tryst of Psyche and Dionysus— Classical Psychodrama in an Archetypal Perspective

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BY BORROWING SOME of the assumptions and perspectives of archetypal psychology (Hillman, 1981), this brief essay seeks to answer the question: What happens in classical psychodrama?

I favor the word *classical* here not only to connote psychodrama in its classical period, when it was brought to flower at the Moreno Institute (1950-1983)—a microcosm in time comparable to the classical period of any culture or art form—but also classical in its belle letteristic sense, referring to the classics and to the culture of Greece and Rome. It is in terms of that classicism that we would describe Psyche and Dionysus in psychodrama.

In classical terms, psychodrama is the union of these two numinous figures from the antique pantheon, Psyche and Dionysus. To Psyche belongs the realm of what we once called soul; and Dionysus presides over the realm of the theater. Psychodrama is soul theater and is as far from the scripted theater on the one hand as it is from the counseling chambers of psychology on the other.

Most of us who practice psychodrama are pulled more strongly toward one god or the other. Many of us who are involved in a clinical setting look at psychodrama in terms of psychotherapy, and when we do, we are likely to miss the almost antitherapeutic force of Dionysus. Others, who bring out the various "theaters of spontaneity," miss the powers and mysteries of Psyche. The balance of Psyche and Dionysus, rightly struck, is Morenean or "classical psychodrama."

I alluded earlier to the Moreno Institute as the cradle of classical psychodrama. A classical period in the development of any art requires particular circumstances—economic, social, spiritual. Genius is not enough; there must be means and soil. This is no place to describe, in any detail, the house that Jacob built. We are only beginning to appreciate the privilege, in terms of freedom, artistic and psychological concentration, nurture and opportunity for experiment that the institute years presented to us. It was a time we shall not likely see again. Moreno's stage was the crucible upon which Psyche and Dionysus were brought

together as they have only been, in my opinion, in shamanic theater and in archaic Greece. Though classical psychodrama has its practitioners, trained at Beacon more by the example than the dicta of Zerka Moreno, it remains now a form met, if at all, in a training context, where time does not restrict the complex mingling of Psyche and Dionysus, and where the demands either of the clinic (therapy) or of the stage (theater) do not force psychodrama in one direction or another.

Consider Psyche and Dionysus: What can these old gods mean to us? To help me in undertaking an answer, I call James Hillman to my assistance. Hillman (1981) is a contemporary psychologist whose writing forms the central nervous system of *archetypal psychology*, which he describes as follows (p. 54). "Archetypal psychology is not a theoretical system emanating from the thought of one person from whom it is named . . . rather [it] presents the polytheistic structure of a post-modern consciousness. It is a style of thinking, a fashion of mind, a revisionist engagement on many fronts, therapy, education, literary criticism . . . it assembles and lends its view points to a variety of intellectual concerns." (For a complete bibliography of Hillman's writing and that of the other figures in the cluster of archetypal psychology, readers should consult the bibliography of *Archetypal Psychology*.)

Hillman is in the lineage of modern mythographers like Freud, Jung, and Ernst Cassirer but linked directly to the mythology-minded writers of the Romantic tradition, back through the Renaissance Platonists, like Giambattista Vico and Ficino, to Plato and "primitive" mythopoetic thought. In what follows, I will quote from Hillman but warn the reader that he is not to be held responsible for my associations.

We shall begin by asking: Who is Psyche?

We know Psyche from the tales about her, but as she has come down through time to us, we may think of Psyche as that which confers meaning. Hillman (1981, p. 14) tells us that "We are not able to use the word in an unambiguous way, even though we take it to refer to that unknown human factor which makes meaning possible, which turns events into experiences, and which is communicated in love."

To be in Psyche's realm, the realm of soul, is to be conscious of meanings, of significances, of inwardness, or depth. All responses to objects or events are Psyche's. The means by which we feel or know about things or events belong to Psyche. Each of us appears to have a psyche, by which we conceive, dream, fancy, design, delve, and there are times when the objective world seems animated by soul (*anima mundi*). Psyche—in Latin, *anima*—is the life in things, the life in the living. There is breath and the mechanism of life; and there is psyche, that which gives life its sense of aliveness, of animation.

*refers  
Anthony Williams  
"The Passionate  
Technique"  
"Hidden Agenda"*

Psyche is never seen directly; no god is. Psyche reveals herself in images, where image means all kinds of showing forth—verbal, actional, envisioned, hallucinated. Hillman (1964, p. 83) speaks of Psyche as "the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image and fantasy—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical." We are most with Psyche when we realize our truths have a fictive, imaginative quality.

Because all our ways of knowing belong to Psyche, we always "see as through a glass darkly" and never face to face. All convictions about the *real* are beguilements, for all we ever have are images, skeins of images, webs of images, prisons of images. Psyche is not substance, but that which confers upon substance a dimension other than substantial. Psyche is not an event, but that which confers upon events the possibility of story.

In that hall of dark glass where Psyche has her numinous seat, we are repeatedly to be reminded that "the soul can be an object of study only when it is also recognized as the subject studying itself by means of the fictions and metaphors of objectivity" (Hillman, 1975, p. 184). This is only another way of stating one of the tenets of classical psychodrama articulated in J. L. Moreno's concept of the dual nature of consciousness, its participant observer status. Moreno coined his own uncertainty principle, knowing that soul theater was a place where Psyche's drama was indissolubly connected to those who created it. Moreno, like Hillman, offered us a poetics, not a philosophy.

Finally, Psyche opposes ego, opposes not as in combat, but as an alternative. Where ego seeks to make things real, graspable, and subject to a dominating will, Psyche dissolves, returns the literal to its figurative source, and insists that all category is fabulous. In its undoing of positivistic structures, Psyche is allied with death.

Dionysus has his links with death as well.

Dionysus is not principally a healer or mender, and certainly not an internalizer. In fact, he is the very opposite. He is an externalizer. He brings out what is inside and turns that into a kind of dramatic show. He is associated with madness, frenzy, and certain terrors. He is a liberator, and his mode of liberation is participation, where participation means both taking part and being made into parts. Dionysus directs us to be free—through action. When Moreno declared his credo: "In the beginning was the Act," he announced his allegiance to Dionysus.

Dionysus is supremely the god of groups and action. He is a god who breaks down boundaries, blurs, blends, fuses. He appears traditionally in the midst of bands of followers who are caught up in his worship. In Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the straightlaced and puritanical Pentheus is no

match for his collective energies. Dionysus forces Pentheus to costume himself and become a player in a drama that will be the king's undoing. Pentheus refuses to submit to the Dionysiac conception that "all the world's a stage" and that we are "merely players." Like the ego, he insists on control, direction, absolutes, and objectivity; though like the ego, Pentheus is irresistibly drawn to his undoing.

Yet, all the world is more than a stage. Dionysus would show us that we are actors composed of actors, being in ourselves whole theaters. We carry within us an enormous troupe of roles or characters—Dionysus and Moreno would say an infinite number. Some of these perform; others hide. Some appear only in our dreams. Surely, it is upon this premise that Moreno's psycho-Dionysian theater is built. "The roles," he says, "precede the self."

Dionysus insists on immediate experience, on the vivid now. Ecstasy, with which he is associated, means only to break the stasis, not necessarily to go into frenzy. Where, however, stasis is the status quo, where the conserved literalisms have turned the dance of living into the robot's rigid walk of life, then breaking this rigidity may appear (and actually be) full of fright. *Ecstasis* may appear as a kind of death. Moreover, for the bounded ego, it is a dying to fuse, to spill out, to merge. Something must die for spontaneity to be born.

Here are some of the things that Hillman (1983, pp. 38ff) says about Dionysus:

[Dionysus moves us] into the role of the enacted one, actor. Healing begins when we move out of the audience and onto the stage . . . become characters in a fiction, even the God-like voice of truth a fiction, and as the drama intensifies, the catharsis occurs. We are purged from attachments, to literal destinies, find freedom in playing parts, partial, dismembered, Dionysian, never being whole, but participating in the whole that is a play, remembered by it as an actor. . . . The particular embodiment of Dionysian logic is the actor. Dionysian logos as the enactment of fiction, oneself an as-if being whose reality comes wholly from imagination and the belief it imposes. The actor is and is not a person and persona, divided and undivided, as Dionysus was called. The self-divided is precisely where the self is authentically located, contrary to Laing. Authenticity is the perpetual dismemberment of being and not being itself, a being that is always in many parts like a dream with a full cast. We all have identity crises because a single identity is a delusion of the monotheistic mind. It would defeat Dionysus at all costs.

"The essence of theatre," Hillman also reminds us, "is knowing that it is theatre. One is playing, enacting, miming in a reality that is completely a fiction." (There is so much relevant and exciting material in this chapter, it is tempting to simply quote at length. This essay of mine grew out of a conversational hour delivered at the 1988 ASGPP convention, a paper devoted more particularly to Hillman's books *Healing Fic-*

*tion* [1983]. For readers interested in Hillman, I think it an excellent place to begin.) In psychodrama, the field of this Dionysian action is opened. Whether as protagonist or auxiliary, the actor is drawn to the stage and the actors' truths—the truths of Dionysus—predominate. The material for this action does not come from the creative imagination of an author or a theatrical tradition as it does in scripted theater; it comes from Psyche herself, resident in the director *and* in the group. Psyche's drama can never be the same twice, for it is the unique expression of the moment and its participants. At this point, we might even wish to ask where the psychodrama comes from and to whom it belongs.

One striking result of the fusion of Psyche and Dionysus is the confounding of the illusion of individual soul. Customarily, we think of soul as a belonging, as "ours," and we think of ourselves as "one." It may be that soul has an individual aspect such that each of us develops soul in our passage through life. Keats, as Hillman is fond of quoting, says "Life is a vale of soul-making," but Dionysus reminds us that the notion of individual soul, of soul as our possession—like the notion of individuality itself—is a fiction. What we see of soul or Psyche in psychodrama is something more than individual. Psychodrama manifests group soul—that faceted, pluralistic nature of soul—and thus the capacity of self to know itself as many, not as one. That is, the experience not merely of the protagonist, but of the group as well.

In psychodrama, three principal elements combine. There is a group, there is a director, and there is a stage. These are the three essential ingredients for psychodramatic production. What comes to pass when the three essential elements are mixed is something that belongs to no one and is formed by many conscious and unconscious forces. Let this analogy serve: Psyche is light, a light that cannot be perceived directly because it is too bright, too ambient. Drama or Dionysus is a prism. In passing through the prism—of director, stage, and group—Psyche is made visible, multiple. She is shaped by the prism and in that sense distorted, but she is also revealed. These revealing distortions alone establish for us a sense of "the biographical fallacy" in psychodrama.

Merely to come on the stage requires that Psyche submit to a complex set of theatrical conventions. She allows herself to come onto a time-bound and space-bound medium that partakes inevitably of certain conserves and conventions. No matter how iconoclastic the theatrical style of the director—Brechtian, surrealist, or Balinese—certain formal steps are imposed upon Psyche. These impositions are the laticework of innumerable moments within theatrical tradition available to the group at its place and time. In other words, the tools are old and belong to no one. Psyche's stage presence is there already with make-up and make-believe.

Then there is the shaping spirit of the director's imagination. More than anyone else in the group, he or she has studied dramatic production, has chosen it to be his or her artistic medium, and has decided to blend into it living players in an unscripted play. The director's aesthetic sense, which is educated, intuitive, imitative, original, gives Psyche her means and bounds. Minimally, the psychodrama is the cocreation of the director's aesthetic sense and the protagonist's material. In that sense, the psychodrama is the duet of two individual Psyches creating a play together. This duet makes even more fallacious or illusory the drama's claim to historical or journalistic "truth." Psychodrama draws upon the fictions of autobiography but underscores the fictive nature of this material, its essentially imaginative nature, and its susceptibility to reformation, to retelling, to revision.

Now add to all this the group. The group asserts itself in many ways. It asserts itself in the first place by enunciating the themes from which dramatic action may be created. Through these various voices, Psyche speaks out, brainstorms her ideas for playing. The group has stories it wants to hear or tell; it has norms, tolerances, and desires that it will express. In the group, there are sets and subsets of sociometric concern that give shape to the possible stories, landscaping them, if you like, into prominences and values. The group spreads out or clusters, occupies its positions on this landscape, fortifies its positions, gives or gains ground, establishes the best turf for the play.

In classical psychodrama, a protagonist comes out of this field as an apparent "one" who will enact the concerns of the many. This one, however, has already been pollinated by the group, is already pregnant with all of them, and thus pregnant with selves. In this protagonist, the several "ones" of the group will find a mirror or a double; for this "one," they will act as auxiliary; from this "one," they will derive knowledge and affirmation, whereas the protagonist, through them, will be dismembered and remembered.

Even greater in its shattering effect upon the fiction of a single Psyche with its story to tell is the work of auxiliary egos. Ostensibly functionaries whose task is accurate representation, they bring into the drama the substream, the unconscious and conscious power, of their own realities. They discover facts of their own story while lending themselves to further the protagonist's story. Their presence makes "story" multidimensional, many-storied, makes it something new—or rather like a dream—by virtue of their participation in it. Through them is channeled the psychic reserve in the group.

Meanwhile, that part of the group that remains as audience sends its several influences streaming into the drama. The silences, sighs,

movements of the group as audience impinge on the shape, lighting, duration, and tempo of the drama, for this drama is produced one time only, by and for the group and thus uniquely stands as a kind of objective metaphor, or image, for the group organism. It may even be said that it is through the psychodramatizing that the group knows itself to be an organism. This kind of organism is very different from a group *organized*, as it usually is, by teams, tasks, scripts, or other impositions.

The innumerable ways these various energies interact during a session have the effect of irradiating Psyche through the group until it is not possible to say whose drama this is. It is, finally, *Psyche's drama*. We all give ourselves over to something that comes from us and is beyond us, upon which we have some influence, but which influences us too. We find ourselves shattered and reflected, in parts and not alone. We are in the field of force generated by the interplay of Psyche and Dionysus. We are knowing ourselves and one another in a new way.

Psychodrama may, like therapy, ease some burden, heal some wound in one or another of its participants, but I am suggesting here that its power is not its bearing upon a part of an individual's story, but rather in its participatory effects, in what it proves to us about our *selves*. It is this, I think, that may account for our sense of its essential quality, its intrinsicness to human life. It is this experience of being present at the tryst of two gods, the fusing of two forces, that liberates us from the shackles of our small biographies and reminds us of a vast, mysterious, and creative world. And in that world, we are not alone.

Those of us who participate in the union of Psyche and Dionysus are vouchsafed a precious revelation: We are given a glimpse of community. It is unlike any other form of community, yet fully deserving of the name. It is, if I have not already overused the word, a kind of archetypal community that, albeit transient and concocted in an arena set apart from daily life, partakes of something timeless and creates in that arena a depth of field for the deepest revelations. What happens in psychodrama is like a glimpse of heaven or a taste of some nectar too sweet for earth. Psyche's drama—or drama's Psyche—is not a place where any of us can live, raise children, or work; but it is community.

Psyche and Dionysus have freed us from the conserved routine; the inner life has been expressed, enacted, shared. We know again we are born actors and that all our actions are jest and gesture, real and played. The narrow island ego finds that it is, indeed, piece of an archipelago, if not a part of the main. It has known a dissolution that feels like a return to source. In that immersion, a primal power comes to us again, known in the Hindu traditions as a kind of enlightenment that sees Indra's vast many-noded net as reality's sociometric skein. Psychodrama's epiphany

When individuals in the group stop being involved with self + focus on another other = protagonist.

shows us that this substantial world is, as Shakespeare said, an “in-substantial pageant,” and that Psyche’s world, with all her fictions, is more real, the ground where all our figures are truly figurative. At their tryst, Dionysus and Psyche dance; and Maya, the delusional literal world of suffering determinisms, is revealed as Lila, play. Once we know that, nothing is the same.

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