

SPIRITUALISM AND PSYCHODRAMA

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J. S. Moreno has acknowledged the affinity of psychodrama with religion in the following words:

"Long before scientific medicine in our sense emerged, the purging of mental as well as of physical ailments with a quasi psycho dramatic shock was practiced. A few years ago, this view was confirmed by a noted anthropologist. After attending a psycho-dramatic session, he informed me that he had just returned from a scientific expedition which took him into a village of Pomo Indians near the California coast. There he had an opportunity to witness a transaction quite similar in atmosphere to psycho-drama."¹

The patterns of psychodrama seem quite similar to those of a spiritualist session. A psychodrama consists, according to Moreno, of a protagonist or subject (patient), the director or chief therapist, the auxiliary egos and the group. The spiritualist session consists of a patient or spiritually disturbed person (protagonist), chairman or president (director or chief therapist), the mediums (auxiliary egos) and the audience or congregation.

The protagonist in psychodrama presents a problem which the auxiliary ego helps to translate into a dramatic role-playing performance. In this way, according to Moreno, "Meaningful psychological experiences of the protagonist are given shape, more thoroughly and more completely than life would permit under normal circumstances."

In the spiritualist session, role-playing is performed in the guise of the spirits which possess the protagonist and the mediums (auxiliary egos). This has affinity to the technique Moreno calls "soliloquy—double technique." He describes this technique:

"In order to overcome resistance, the auxiliary ego plays the double of the protagonist. He gets the protagonist to participate in a soliloquy and perhaps to admit the hidden reasons he has for refusing" (to counter play in the drama).

Conceived as a psychodramatic performance, the spiritualist session enacts the intrapsychic conflict of the patient in a drama in which the spirit demands reparation for unfulfilled promises. In alluring him to the Earth with false promises his evolution is retarded, and he thus becomes vindictive.

¹Moreno, A. S., "Psychodrama," in Arieti, S., *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, New York, Basic Books, 1959. p. 1376.

The techniques of sorcery presuppose that upon death, the spirit loses its "capacidad," becomes naive, and enters into a state of infantile ignorance. The sorcerer takes advantage of such ignorance and he "sways it over with any little trick." The "swaying" seems to have the characteristics of magical coercion when it involves:

- (1) the use of the water in which the body of the dead person was bathed (custom demands that the deceased be bathed before having a shroud put on);
- (2) a prayer delivered in reverse;
- (3) candles being lighted;
- (4) the taking of a fistful of earth from the grave to sprinkle on the porch of the victim's house, while ordering the spirit to inflict on that victim the condition that caused his own death.

Spiritualist "faculties" do not belong to the domain of routine experiences or common knowledge. It is rather a faculty that few possess, and it is independent of its possessor's volition. In fact, some sicknesses, according to spiritualist interpretation, present a warning or an admonition to a person who possesses potential spiritualist faculties and has not put them into practice. The person gifted with such faculties acquires, in his role as a medium, an interpersonal image distinct from that of his routine life. In a trance, the person acquires extraordinary "strengths," "powers," "fluids," "currents," and "faculties" that enable him to impose his beneficent will upon his clients.

Tulio Gerena's² powers of suggestion in his role as a spiritual psychotherapist are quite impressive. We had the opportunity of observing him dispense treatment of this type to a patient who had been in a catatonic-like state for a period of about three days. The following is a complete transcription of the treatment accorded to this patient:

a) *Spiritualist Curing*

One Sunday, a neighbor, Gavino Valedón, came to Tulio's house to ask for aid. Casilda, his wife, had been in her bed for three days, without so much as moving. Casilda remained, he went on, with fixed glance, without twinkling of the eyes, and having taken no food or drink whatsoever. She had responded to none of his inquiries about her health, nor to his attempts to move her. Her body was rigid, in a position like a "corpse."

As if to acquaint me with the situation, Tulio told me, as soon as

²A complete life history of Tulio Gerena is published in *Social Change and Personality in a Puerto Rican Agrarian Reform Community*, in press. The personal names in this study are fictitious.

Gavino had departed, that "these people are always making vows to the dead and then not living up to them. They say prayers backwards and call up those infernal creatures and then they don't give them what they had offered; then, when they least expect it, they're struck down with some retribution. They'll go to the Center and get well but as soon as they stop going, the causes they have come back to torment them."

After a short walk, we arrived at the house of the afflicted woman. Mrs. Ursula Echeverría arrived along with Gavino. She was to serve as an auxiliary medium to Tulio.

The doors and windows of the house were carefully closed before Tulio took a chair at the head of the patient's bed. He asked for a glass of water and placed it on a small table lying between himself and Ursula Echeverría, the auxiliary medium, who was seated by the foot of the bed. With a very circumspect gesture, Tulio invited me to sit on the stool that had been placed beside him. There was absolute silence and Tulio began an invocation to the protective spirits:

"We have gathered here in order to help this sister who is lying here, perturbed by a confused brother of her spirit. We ask our protective spirits and the Guardian Angel to come to our aid, with the leave and good will of God the Father. Let us concentrate our minds then so we'll receive their message. Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . ."

At this time, Ursula's (the auxiliary medium) facial expression began to tighten, and she shook from head to foot. She closed her eyes and lifted her arms to the level of her face, and, with forced breath, started speaking:

"Peace and justice brothers of my spirit. I come with God's help . . . to aid this sister of the spirit . . . so that the spirit that, out of ignorance, has come to this valley of tears, responding to false promises, may now depart from her."

For a moment, the auxiliary medium seems confused, unable to continue or to find something to say and she turns to Tulio to ask for "words to speak," because "we spirits that are suffering all the anguish . . . and the material beings . . ." Apparently, Ursula has reached the limit of her verbal resources and again asked Tulio for "words." Tulio comes to her aid:

"If the spirits are suffering, what I want is that, through this medium, they tell me what is wrong with this sister."

Ursula's breathing has become increasingly difficult and her voice is choked.

Ursula:

"We Spirits can't be brothers with mortals. And we do suf-

fer. We suffer for all of you. These people are very proud and have forgotten the spirits and just because she has forgotten us we are coming back to punish her. Vengeance!"

The standard diagnosis already mentioned by Tulio in his house has been applied. It may be described as follows: the patient established "communication" with the "spirits" but lacking in sufficient psychological skills and in strength to "resist," or direct their forces, has been overwhelmed by these unleashed demoniacal forces. Upon the breaking of her resistance or "faculties," the patient's body (ego) has been possessed by the power of the spirit.

Tulio asks the medium to aid him in exorcising the spirit who has possessed Casilda.

For a moment Ursula remains calm, then goes into another trance. "Peace and Justice brother of my spirit." (She now retells the suffering of the spirits as they bear their chains for suppliants and begins to indict the patient for having failed to offer aid.)

Tulio replies, haltingly:

"You're right, brother, there are ignorant people who don't know what they're doing when they offer the spirits everything under the sun and this is the result."

At this point the patient seems to relax from her rigid state. Her glassy eyes take on an expression of bitterness and she utters: "Oh, God."

The therapist has begun to break through the conflicting forces by taking a surrogate role externalizing the super ego functions. In a commanding tone, Tulio now addresses her:

"You're a spirit and you have to realize it. Recognize yourself, brother, now that you have abandoned this earth and have to go back to where you can advance in your appropriate and corresponding place. You have to leave your yearning for the things of this world. Every minute more that you spend on earth prolongs your sufferings and delays your advance. What you're doing is against your own good because you left the valley of tears long ago but you have been disturbed and bothered in those realms of God, searching for a material wrapping."

Casilda begins to respond. Tulio grasps her hands and she begins kicking her feet while moaning, "Oh God." All the while, Tulio is pleading with the spirit to leave her body, warning him that he³ is making a mistake and is also harming her. Slowly but surely Casilda calms down. There is a noticeable pallor on her feet, hands and face. Tulio continues telling the spirit that with each moment

³Spanish language does not have the impersonal pronoun "it." All spirits are addressed by the masculine personal pronoun.

he spends on mother earth, he slows his advance. Ursula as interpreter of Casilda's spirit now answers by thanking Tulio for the advice because she, or he, has worked with Tulio before and knows that he is a good man.

Now Tulio tells the spirit that he is going to send him off with two other brothers who are preparing to take him to God the Father. He makes a gesture symbolic of impulsion upwards into the sky. Ursula exhales and groans, and Tulio begins the next step, which consists of taking Casilda's hands and transferring the spirit to Ursula. Tulio now states that he is about to pass the spirit to Ursula. He takes Ursula's hands and joins them with Casilda's; the latter continues resisting. Now Tulio gestures as if he were pushing a substance—fluids—from the patient's head toward her hands and across into Ursula's hands. Ursula writhes slightly. For some moments Tulio winces and flinches while exhaling sighs as if he had touched an electrified object, but, nonetheless, he continues to cleanse the "substance" in toward Ursula. Casilda cries out, "You're tearing out my soul." Momentarily, Casilda regains composure. Ursula releases her hands and begins to tremble more intensely. This indicates that the "spirit" now lies within Ursula. The recrimination of Ursula to Casilda now becomes more bitter. Tulio does not allow Casilda to lie back on her bed: "Sit up—you don't have any more electricity" (or fluid charges). Ursula reiterates that the spirits live so badly in the realms of God, whereas mortals live so well (the theme of envy in the community). Casilda, now impulsed or possessed by her own spirit, undertakes a dialogue with Ursula, who speaks for the spirit that had possessed Casilda. Ursula warns that when Casilda dies and her spirit abandons her body, he will be waiting in space "to square accounts." Casilda replies that only God has the power to do that. The dialogue continues until Tulio intervenes, once again explaining to the misplaced spirit of Ursula that his actions are harmful. "The spirit" thanks Tulio and admits that he now recognizes his error and wants to depart. He apologizes to all the people present. Tulio says that he will aid him not only with advice, but also, "just to show you," and makes a gesture to take Ursula's hands, who now flinches and exhales as if establishing electric contact. Tulio says, "You can go with these two protectors to God the Father; they're going to help you out." The "spirit" begs pardon and Tulio answers that he forgives him and that he hopes God will also pardon him for what he has done. Meanwhile, Casilda's own spirit had taken leave.

Without having returned to consciousness, Ursula becomes possessed, once again, by one of her helpers or protectors. This spirit gives advice to Casilda, through Ursula. Tulio asks that she extract

the fluids and Ursula immediately begins to rub and massage Casilda. She rubs the patient's stomach and runs her hands over Casilda's face as if washing an infant's face. Ursula makes nonvocalized sounds of exhalation and trembles periodically. She then asks Gavino for rubbing alcohol and returns to her normal state, while still rubbing Casilda with alcohol. Casilda remains in light contact. Tulio recites a Catholic rosary and declares the session at an end. He had used a water "fountain" (glass of water) twice during the departure of the spirits, once by placing Ursula's hands in the glass and asking her to put the "currents," or something similar, into the water. Ursula shook her hands in the water as if trying to cleanse them of a powder. Tulio asked for another glass of water and proceeded to make gestures around it as if to transfer something from his hands into the glass, and then gave it to the patient to drink. The water helped Casilda to calm down and to begin relating at a still higher level of contact.

The session having ended, Casilda rose and walked into an adjoining room, where she sat down on the floor. She had eaten nothing in three days and was very weak. Tulio asked Gavino if there was something they could give her to eat. Gavino answered, "If I had married another woman, I'd be rich today." He said he could tell when the spirit approached but he didn't know what to do. Last Friday, when he came in the afternoon, he felt its presence because his head became drowsy. Then he said his wife did not speak to him when she was possessed.

Translated into a psychoanalytic frame of reference, the allegorical drama represents the patient's exacerbated forbidden impulses or deeply repressed feelings, his inability to cope with these unleashed "demoniacal" forces, his overwhelmed ego by the "return of the repressed from the repressed."

The medium verbalizes the patient's unconscious conflicts and in this way creates the condition for awareness, working through tolerance, and transference toward objects necessary to break through the narcissic miasma.

The chairman operates as a tolerant rational parental surrogate while the medium goes on personifying the "disturbing spirits," repeating his recriminations. The chairman pleads with them to leave the patient alone and promises to help them re-enter the sphere of "divine" control, or perhaps super-ego control back into repression. This promise is followed by gestural symbols which represent, within the consensus of the participants, a legitimate expression of concern and support for the patient's failing effort of repression. The patient responds and lets her "fluids" (symbolic of libid-

inal drives) be transmitted to the auxiliary medium, whose ego symbolically neutralizes the power of the drives.

The therapist's acceptance of the patient's awe-inspiring operations and his direct involvement in "neutralizing" the currents communicate affective support strengthening the patient's ego.

Validation by inter-subjective consensus about the legitimacy of the "neutralizing" procedures presents an additional supporting factor. The results are effective. Electric shock would have perhaps attained the same results. Yet shock therapy seems brutal and inhuman compared with the affective reinforcement and gradual integration of the patient into the interpersonal reality aided by the direct participation of the therapist, portrayed in the spiritualist treatment of Casilda. Although both the spiritualist and shock treatment are symptomatic in character, the long range consequences of shock treatment might be quite different from those attained by the "psychodramatic" method, portrayed in a spiritualist session.

There are striking similarities between psychoanalysis and spiritualism in the conceptualization (not in the terminology) employed to describe psycho-spiritual disturbances. The concept of "fluids" in spiritism and that of libido in psychoanalysis do not seem too distant. An explanation of emotional collapse in terms of an overwhelming of the ego by the return of the repressed, does not differ greatly from a metaphorical explanation of the same phenomenon in terms of possession of the person by tormenting spirits with whom the patient has had affective relation in this or in another "existence" (existential situation). Translated to a therapeutic technique, both methods attempt to work through the patient's "resistance," facilitating the transference of the anxiety producing conflicts into the session within a climate of tolerance and effective emotional reinforcement and meaningful communication conducive to abreaction.

ABSTRACT

The similarities between the structural patterns of a spiritualist session and psychodrama are described from a theoretical viewpoint. An account of a spiritualist session with a patient who had been in a catatonic-like state for three days is presented. This session is then analyzed in psychoanalytic terms.

RESUMEN

Se describen desde un punto de vista teórico las similitudes entre los diseños estructurales de una sesión espiritista y el psicodrama. Se presenta una narración de una sesión espiritista con un paciente que había permanecido en un estado semi-catatónico durante

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tres días. A continuación, se analiza esta sesión en términos psicoanalíticos.

RESUMO

As semelhanas entre os padrões estruturais de uma sessão espírita e psicodrama são descritos de um ponto de vista teórico. Apresenta-se um relato de uma sessão espírita com um paciente que estava em estado tipo-catatônico por três dias. Esta sessão é logo a seguir analisada em termos psicoanalíticos.

