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The Shadow's Symphony

Archetypal Awakening in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*

Rebekah Hood

On May 29, 1913, Igor Stravinsky's highly anticipated ballet score, *The Rite of Spring*, premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. This production combined the efforts of Stravinsky, the composer; Serge Diaghilev, the director of the Ballets Russes; Nikolai Roerich, the designer of set and costume; and Vaslav Nijinsky, the choreographer. After months of effort, the contributors had high hopes for *The Rite*, but the opening night appeared to be a failure. The un-balletic movements of the dancers and the unsettling dissonance of the music incited a riot, and the audience shouted insults and profanities at the ballet company. Their clamor quickly overwhelmed the orchestra, forcing Nijinsky to bellow out counting sequences, so his dancers could proceed with their routine (Hill 30). At first, Stravinsky was disgusted with the audience's response and felt that he and the company had been slighted. However, news of the riot swept the world, and he was pleased to find that *The Rite's* debut was declared chaotic, controversial, and scandalous. The night of the premiere was not what the company expected, but according to Diaghilev, it was "exactly what I wanted" (qtd. in Hill 31).

Historical accounts of *The Rite's* premiere primarily document the pandemonium in the theatre and the outrage of the audience who

witnessed what seemed like an assault on music itself. However, there are those patrons who appreciated the magnitude of *The Rite* from the onset as it ushered in a new era of modernism. Gertrude Stein, for instance, regarded *The Rite* as the latest avant-garde sensation and praised the performance's ability to awaken the crudest of reactions among listeners (Heisler 696). T. S. Eliot also praised *The Rite* after seeing a revised performance in 1921. In the October 1921 issue of *The Dial*, Eliot celebrated the masterpiece's "quality of modernity . . . the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life" (qtd. in Heisler 697). Eliot's publication helped transform *The Rite* into a symbol of modernist culture. The performance's sacrifice of the Chosen One became representative of the painful genesis of a new, abrasive aesthetic (697), while its composer inherited the identity of "an avant-garde scandal-maker" (Butler 35).

While composing the score, Stravinsky was unquestionably modernist in his aversion to melody, rhythm, and the European system of tonality. Despite his potential among modernists and avant-gardists, Stravinsky explained that he did not write music for the sake of experimenting or promoting a radical change in the existing social order. Rather, he considered himself "the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed" (qtd. in Toorn 155). This detachment from intention created authenticity and liberated *The Rite* from the conventions that domesticated music (Adorno 107). This reduction produced a phenomenon in its purest essence, a chaotic spirit that surpassed the composer's immediate skill and forced a violent encounter of sound upon the audience. Although Stravinsky regarded himself as a mere emissary of *The Rite's* sheer force, he nonetheless created a visceral effect that awakened troubling images and stimulated an encounter with the shadow, a Jungian archetype that embodies the darkness and wildness of character that exists outside the light of consciousness (Jung, "Psychology" 88). *The Rite* produced a powerfully unsettling experience but intentionally so—it entreated its audience to not only acknowledge the shadow that blackens human character, but to also recognize its potential to enrich a world that is unfettered by convention and formality.

The Shadow Archetype

Archetypal theory and the concept of the shadow owe allegiance to C. W. Jung, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who devoted his life to studying the collective unconscious. Jung describes the collective unconscious as “a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn” and possesses “contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals” (“Archetypes and Collective Unconscious” 3–4). The contents of the collective unconscious are called archetypes, which reveal the hidden secrets of the soul through profound images (7). The shadow, one of Jung’s main archetypes, implies “the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the contents of the personal unconscious” (“Psychology” 87). People unknowingly subdue their shadow because it represents the darkest aspects of the psyche that harken back to animal ancestry. The uncertainty and wildness that follow the shadow are disconcerting, but Jung cautioned that if the archetype is not acknowledged, it will become even darker in its state of impoverishment (88).

The shadow contains “a vast domain of . . . primitive tendencies” that, while disquieting, stir a fascination with the exotic (“Psychology” 88). This exotic spirit is suggested in the full title of Stravinsky’s piece, *The Rite of Spring: Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts*, which speaks of the unknown story of modern Russia’s prehistoric roots. Accordingly, *The Rite* depicts a group of primitives who participate in ritual dances and eventually elect the Chosen One, a virgin who dances herself to death and is offered as a sacrifice to the god of spring. *The Rite* had potential to secure immediate popularity on the night of the premiere because an excitement for the primitive already existed in the modernist imagination (Heisler 697). Annegret Fauser, a cultural musicologist, elaborates, “Virginal sacrifice and pagan rite were in the mainstream of Parisian theatrical topics. . . . The ballet [*The Rite of Spring*] seemed designed to satisfy a local hunger for exotic primitivism, although in the end it proved too brutal for the opening-night audience to handle” (qtd. in Ross 3). While the stomp of the dancers, the unusual set, and the clashing polytonality certainly contributed to the unrest, the sheer brutality of the

performance and the immediacy of the audience's reaction actually resulted from the provocation of the shadow archetype. This provocation forced the bitter realization that the boundaries separating modern life and the primitivism on the stage were "absolutely artificial" (Clifford 558).

The Collective Unconscious

In his *Philosophy of New Music*, Theodor Adorno, a fundamental European philosopher and musicologist, recognizes these darker undercurrents in *The Rite* and even connects the piece with Jungian philosophy. Adorno writes that while it is unlikely that these two contemporaries knew each other, there is a remarkable connection between Stravinsky's collective authenticity and Jung's doctrine. *The Rite* is the musical counterpart to the collective unconscious because it is the gateway to primordial origins (Adorno 111). Jung theorizes that the initial manifestation of the primordial appears in dreams, visions, or fantasies. He describes these visions as "assaults of the unconscious" and emphasizes the importance of seeking understanding because their "contents are not dead, outmoded forms, but belong to our living being" ("Confrontation" 79, 75). Jung did not dismiss his own dreams as foolishness but assumed a responsibility to awaken the signified meanings within the dream material. Similarly, the archaic images of *The Rite* unexpectedly assaulted Stravinsky's unconscious. He stated, "The idea of *Le Sacre du printemps* came to me while I was still composing *The Firebird*. I had dreamed a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death" (qtd. in Hill 3). Even as Stravinsky composed, he had fleeting visions of an old augur among the tribe of primitives (15). Troubled by these dream sequences, Stravinsky sought the professional opinion of Nikolai Roerich, Russia's leading scholar in tribal art and ancient ritual, to help interpret these visions (5).

Although Roerich's expertise was undoubtedly helpful in informing the staging and costumes of the ballet, a textbook history of Russia's origins could not adequately articulate Stravinsky's glimpse of the collective unconscious. Commenting on the struggle of this task of translation, Jung revealed the following from his own experience: "Since I did not know what was going on, I had no choice but to write everything down in the style selected by the unconscious itself" ("Confrontation" 79). It is in this manner that Stravinsky proceeded to translate the archetypal symbols and compose *The Rite*. In analyzing the original score manuscript, many

scholars have noted the unusual nature of Stravinsky's handwriting. Peter Hill, a musicologist and scholar on the composition of *The Rite*, clarifies, "The handwriting is curious, as though Stravinsky had devised the rhythm before finding a tune to fit in—in line with the description he gave to Roerich of the old woman: ' . . . I see her running in front of the group, stopping them sometimes, and interrupting the rhythmic flow'" (Hill 15). As Hill indicates, Stravinsky's method of composition was certainly unorthodox, but it fell in line with Jung's philosophy to work in the language of the unconscious itself. Stravinsky, in fact, stated that he was not guided by any compositional system, and his approach was more instinctive (qtd. in Hill 15).

The Language of the Shadow Archetype

Every element of *The Rite of Spring* conforms to the style of the archetype. The ballet begins, for example, not with the typical grace and agility of ballerinas, but with the ritual dance of savages who celebrate the coming of spring. They dance with a mechanical precision that is disciplined but seems, at the same time, inferior to the modern mobility of the human race. This depiction, while unusual, supports Jung's theory that the primitive savage is a manifestation of the shadow ("Psychology" 87). The appearance of *The Rite's* primitives is alarming, but they do not play a significant role in any narrative. Rather, their presence contributes to an overall archaic effect (Adorno 116). In order to maintain this effect, *The Rite* is not motivated by plot so that it can present the raw immediacy of prehistoric rite. Thus while Nijinsky's original choreography appears mysterious and disjointed, it was designed "to depict a series of primitive ceremonies" rather than "describe such rites in the form of narration or story" (Toorn 3). Stravinsky left Nijinsky with specific instructions to dance for the entirety of the performance and never pantomime (4). *The Rite* would deliver a presentation rather than a representation of pagan rites; it "would not tell a story of a pagan ritual; it would be that ritual" (Taruskin 865). Any attempt to civilize the depiction of ancient rite would erode the archetypal language and repress the coarseness of the shadow. Therefore, in a striking paradox, the disorder and savagery of the presentation renews *The Rite* with authenticity that preserves the visceral spirit of the shadow archetype.

The choreography is not the only element of *The Rite* that defies tradition and is unorthodox. The rhythm that is rigidly maintained in the composition evokes the mechanistic, bodily movements of primitive rite and

is most apparent in “Augurs of Spring” in which layers of dissonant, melodic fragments burst forth in pulsing beats. Peter van den Toorn, a professor of twentieth-century music, suggests the reason why the rhythm seems so harsh is because it is completely detached from any principles of musicality, such as harmony and timbre. Because the rhythm is reduced to meter or “mathematical groupings,” it lacks any relation to the compositional whole (60). This detachment comes at the expense of equilibrium and leaves the audience with a constant feeling of anxiety.

In addition to the rhythmic structure, the orchestral composition follows in the pattern of the archetype by completely rejecting the European principles of tonality. In this system, musical pieces are composed according to a hierarchy of tones. One note, called the tonic, is the tonal center of the piece, while all of the other notes eventually resolve towards this center. The tonal system creates music that is unified and harmonious, and it heavily influenced musical composition from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. *The Rite* was composed during a time in which classical composers were more innovative in how they approached harmony and melody, but even this age of experimentation could not have prepared the audience for *The Rite's* premiere. Perhaps what was most alarming to the premiere audience was the repetition of the Augurs chord, a double chord that plays two diatonically unrelated triads simultaneously and is notorious for its overwhelming dissonance. This chord sounds over two hundred times in the second section of *The Rite*, “The Augurs of Spring,” where the chord derives its name (Heisler 703). This feature of *The Rite* produced an immediate reaction among listeners and critics who said that the Augurs chord’s absolute renunciation of tradition was an affliction on music, and it transformed *The Rite* “into something other than music, into sheer barbarousness and cacophony” (703).

However, Ezra Pound explains in his *ABC of Reading* how elements that unify a piece such as melody are artificial because they are “furthest removed from anything the composer finds THERE, ready in nature” (24). Melody and the reconfiguration of rhythm that embellish the composition and harmonize elements of discord domesticate the shadow through the destruction of the archetypal language. What Stravinsky finds in nature and presents to his audience is mysterious, dark, and potentially violent. It presents “a side of man who is less ideal and more primitive than we should like to be” (“Psychology” 88) and offers a glimpse of an “exotic alternative,”

the other reality that asserts a constant influence on the psyche (Clifford 542). Knowing that this alternate reality should not be ignored, *The Rite* utilizes music and dance in a way that stimulates an encounter with the shadow in order to render the strange and incomprehensible familiar (542). This familiarization is possible only if the audience recognizes the reality of the archetype and its frequent influence on the ego (Jung, "Shadow" 91).

Conclusion

Despite the wildly visceral energy of *The Rite*, Stravinsky was discontent with the piece's final chord and described its abrupt conclusion as "a noise" (qtd. in Hill 89). This ultimate noise, however, epitomizes the spirit of *The Rite* because it eludes resolution. The British musicologist Arnold Whittall explains that the piece's "contrary tendencies clash inside without ever finding their way to a complete synthesis" (95). *The Rite's* finale—an assault of sound, images, and energy of unprecedented ferocity—deeply troubled the audience because it never resolved (Hill 89). Their hope that plot climaxes would arrive at their conclusion and music would resolve towards its tonal center is synonymous with the hope that the shadow could be subdued within their consciousness. Such resolution was sought after in subsequent renditions of *The Rite* that streamlined Stravinsky's score (Ross 3). Musicians became more skilled in undertaking difficult repertoire and performed *The Rite* with flawless precision and clarity. These renderings, however, detract from the spirit of the piece. Music critic Alex Ross asserts that unblemished representations of *The Rite* reduce the piece from a profound, "unholy mess" into a product that is "[removed] from the wildness of the original" (3).

When musicians and listeners render *The Rite* more lifeless, they simultaneously attempt to repress and isolate the shadow, as if their neglect could kill the monster. What they fail to understand, however, is that the more humanity tries to subdue the shadow in their conscious life, "the blacker and denser it is" (Jung, "Psychology" 88). *The Rite* attempts to break the artificial barriers by giving listeners a glimpse of exotic realities that embellish the world by stirring dark and primitive tendencies that thrive within human character. It forces the audience to not only hear the shadow's music, but to also allow the soul's participation in the symphony.

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