

## ***“Melancholy Atoms”***

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### **I. An Anatomy of Sadness**

Sorrow has been banished from the palette of acceptable behaviours almost to the degree that the experience of death has been erased from the public consciousness. Both make their acceptable short-term appearance in reading and entertainment, or for political purposes, but must be dealt with expediently and not be allowed to have any negative long-term impact on the machinery of production and consumption. Thus, Jeffrey Smith points out, in *Where the Roots Reach for Water*, the economic associations of the word depression, and suggests that those modern cultural preoccupations with economic viability lie at the root of pathologizing a condition that frequently deprives the sufferer of the ability to make a profitable contribution to a materialistic society. Better to be medicated, deprived of feeling altogether but superficially more normal, than to be seen indulging in melancholy's grasp, suspended in a shroud of sadness.

Depression is so silent in our culture because its voice is frequently stifled by an inability to articulate what is happening inside. Yet the depressive knows that the articulation, the reification and naming of her pain could help her pull through it. The purpose of this project is to confront the pain, to find its meaning, to share its reality, to make others see the world and the self through her eyes and heart. Maybe there's a point, maybe there's something to be found that must be passed through. The pain of longing, the beauty of absence, the anatomy of sadness - are they encrypted missives from the hidden soul rather than neural misfirings or personality flaws to be expunged?

The proposition this work will explore is not new, perhaps, and I'm not even sure of its ultimate merit, but for me (and others) it represents the only direction left, in a maze of dead ends: that melancholia (a more comprehensive and open-ended term than depression) is an expression of a fundamental, unfulfilled spiritual need. To state more simply that depression is characterized by a lack of hope seems to put the symptom before the cause and lock up the solution once again within a clinical or psychoanalytical context. Here, we try to address it differently, by diving in and exploring the spectre face to face, poetically, following its own clues, allowing it to resonate with its mythological associations, rather than trying to make it disappear by denying its validity. When we confront the varied definitions, experiences and interpretations of melancholy with each other, we find that the argument over its origin, meaning and treatment represents a struggle over the human soul. In terms of the proposed play, the principal dramatic conflict is one not of good vs. evil, but of science vs. poetry, head vs. heart, matter vs. spirit.

## Depression vs. Melancholia

Whereas the clinical term *depression* dispassionately maps the spread of a contemporary medical condition, *melancholy* (and its associations) like a magic key reveals itself as a phenomenon through centuries, nay millenia, of artistic and cultural endeavours. Depression victimizes the sufferer, with the only solace being that one is not, evidently, alone - and yet, one remains completely isolated in all that multitude. Not only is the worst thing for one's mental health the company of misery, but also, depression spells the very antithesis of creative action. Nowadays, the suffering, moody artist is suspected of being a slacker who uses his profession as an excuse to misbehave and shirk his responsibility to contribute to the greater good. As a result of having been repeatedly disabused of the "romantic" stereotype of the artist, I have guiltily fought for most of the past twenty years to bury and disavow my own suspect emotional tendencies and had long dismissed melancholia as a valid explanation. Thus it came as a relief and a revelation to read the celebrated author William Styron's account of his depression - which almost ended in suicide - entitled *Darkness Visible* :

When I was first aware that I had been laid low by the disease, I felt a need ... to register a strong protest against the word "depression."  
Depression, most people know, used to be termed "melancholia," a word which appears in English as early as the year 1303 ... . "Melancholia" would still appear to be a far more apt and evocative word for the blacker forms of the disorder, but it was usurped by a noun with a bland tonality and lacking any magisterial presence, used indifferently to describe an economic decline or a rut in the ground, a true wimp of a word for such a major illness.<sup>1</sup>

The depictions of melancholy, in art, aesthetics and philosophy, range from the sublime to the trite. It becomes increasingly sentimentalized (and pathologized) from the Age of Reason onward, when it loses its association with the spiritual, with an intuition of transcendent truth, even though, of course, we continue to encounter the temperament in artists, writers and other searchers right up to the present.

## Artefacts of the Soul

The concept of an *innate temperament*, part of that side of the nature-or-nurture debate that, for a time, was banished due to its latent political incorrectness, has resurfaced under various scientific guises, but culturally and linguistically it can still be traced to its origins in the theory of the four humours (phlegm, blood, yellow and black bile). We still depict people as phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric and melancholic. The melancholy humour distinguishes itself by the fact that, unlike the other three, no physical evidence of the existence of "black bile" has ever been brought forward. The melancholic temperament, moreover, is identified with the god (and planet) Saturn (hence, saturnine - somber or taciturn). The influence of the Greeks is pervasive: Hippocrates first identified "melancholia" as an illness in the 5th century BC, and the Roman god Saturn, originally the god of agriculture, took on many of the characteristics of the Greek ur-god Kronos, who in his jealousy and fear devoured his children. Kronos (also, as evident from

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<sup>1</sup> Styron, 36-7.

the name, the “father” of time) was eventually usurped and exiled to the Underworld, where he retreated into lonely contemplation and became associated with chaos, misery and darkness, as well as with the forces of creative regeneration.<sup>2</sup> Even from this cursory survey of the terminology and its roots, we get a glimpse of the richness of imagery and associations that suffuse our cultural memory of this elusive condition.

The act of conscious recognition, if not of perception itself, is inextricably subjective. Nevertheless, the artist takes upon herself the task of communicating that experience, or rather, that interpretation of experience - in effect, *to make the object speak* in the voice it used to speak to her. The artist, therefore, must rely on the practicable illusion that the object, filtered through the work, is capable of expressing what was originally a uniquely private encounter. The experience of melancholy, like Buddhist meditation, is about as private as it gets. The latter is inexpressible, the former incapable of expression, both tightly wrapped inside the core of the individual consciousness. But only one of them is there by choice, the other is silently screaming to be let out. Problem is, for the melancholic the incantatory powers of language have long dissipated, its ladders of structure and logic collapsed in a pile of pointlessness on the ground, next to what’s left of Humpty Dumpty. This paralyzing dissolution of the regular means of communication is one of the experiences to be portrayed in the piece. The inherent contradiction (to be transcended in the creative act) is of course that we are attempting to give a voice to the breakdown of communication and meaning. The key is in the act itself, and in the how. That is to say, the creative act infuses hope, takes the symptom at face value, as meaningful in itself, and seeks an alternate means of expression in order to break the deadlock. But it is not merely intended as therapy. It is a search for an answer that cannot be obtained by “treating” (i.e. ameliorating) the condition, but by taking the condition itself to embody the question to be addressed. It posits (since there is no alternative) that the depths and the heights, darkness and light, are linked as in a circle, rather than separated by an impassable gulf. But it must proceed without anticipating an unambiguous resolution, otherwise it commits the same hubris that medicine is bound by, which is, that the subject/patient merely needs to be brought “back” to a known state of wellness. Instead, the idea is to break through in the other direction, down the path of fear and uncertainty. Moreover, and this is the other half of the gamble, we are assuming that there is something here that is trying to speak out, that has something to say but is, as it were, tongue-tied. We are not alone in this: artists have always brought back with them from the brink a the strange fragrant dust of their journey, and transformed it into words or images that have become part of the cultural consciousness.

Literary works from *Don Quixote* through Goethe’s *Faust* to Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* examine the question of life’s meaning from the point of view of the melancholic. In his foreword to Hassoun’s *The Cruelty of Depression*, Michael Vincent Miller recalls that, according to the literary critic Anatole Broyard,

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<sup>2</sup> for a more detailed discussion of the aforementioned, see Smith, 30ff.

“The modern serious novel is an attempt of the writer to identify his depression.” And an influential Italian sociologist, Francesco Alberoni, wrote that “Like every other movement, falling in love springs, at the individual level, from an excess of depression.”<sup>3</sup>

Succinctly, Miller continues:

One could interpret both Broyard’s and Alberoni’s propositions as telling us that love and art may be among our deepest struggles to master the problem of depression. How? By giving us a reason to live. By transforming a shadowy dreadful passion that robs one of a world into productive passions that connect one to the world.<sup>4</sup>

And while Hassoun’s thesis, that depression is ultimately linked to the loss of the mother’s breast, may be too reductively psychoanalytical to be of value to the present discussion, its spiritual-cultural manifestation is poignant: “For Hassoun, depression - or melancholy, as he continues to call it - is the shadow thrown across consciousness by the loss of paradise.”<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, thus, it is the yearning for a state of grace that identifies the quest of both the artist and the spritual pilgrim. It has always been my conviction that, at its most basic, art is a strategy for constructing (or, depending on one’s ontological orientation, invoking) patterns of meaning that one can live within.

### **Thoughts on the Melancholy Protagonist:**

Perhaps part of the reason melancholy has been explored so rarely in drama, compared to poetry and visual art, is that it manifests itself primarily as an experiential state, while traditional drama is based on action and conflict. True, the most famous fictional melancholic - here, Hamlet, though Don Quixote equally merits the title - is a dramatic protagonist, but his condition is portrayed by means of an externally imposed crisis. Hamlet is endlessly fascinating, of course, not least because, like Faust’s, his melancholia is inextricably linked to the philosophical quest for absolute truth. Certainly, we ought to study both of these characters in the context of our project, along with Don Quixote. What is interesting in all these cases is that the melancholy protagonist sets himself a single-minded and well-nigh insurmountable task - the further removed from his immediate self, his daily existence (witness how Hamlet becomes focussed and resolute as soon as he is removed from the context of his inquiry and confronted by certain death). The melancolic can be highly effective when distracted from the cause of his suffering - the situation of self. His goal-orientedness is at once a coping mechanism and that which eats away at his insides. He is most lost in situations of ‘ordinary’ crisis. He may be less afraid of fighting dragons than of getting dressed for dinner. Imagine the hero without an ulterior super-objective; his life falls apart. Heracles cleaning his room. Hamlet on a perfectly harmless date with Ophelia, sipping a soda and engaging in smalltalk. Faust shopping for shoes.

Some who are are not born to be heroes, nevertheless suffer from the heroic dream, make ourselves suffer by *almost* acknowledging its unattainability, yet continuing to yearn in its shadow. All of Chekhov’s characters.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cruelty of Depression*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

## **II. Approaches to Performance**

I want to create an experience that induces in the audience that desperate motion towards an elusive meaning, through the anarchic morass of a chaotic consciousness, that characterizes the melancholic obsession. Trapped within a reality that threatens to fall apart, a more than tenuous sense of self, you are plunged into darkness and confusion, pursuing (when not utterly paralysed) some vaguely glimpsed, ever-shifting dream. The world at large continually thrusts you from your path, which it considers at best inefficient, at worst, unprofitable.

This project would be a significant undertaking, not necessarily in scale, but certainly in intellectual and emotional scope. One of the insufferable drawbacks of collective creation tends to be that the end result collapses into a trite emotionalism, as a result of trying to accommodate a variety of individual goals and ideas within a coherent whole. All sorts of exciting tangents are first explored, then abandoned in the absence of consensus or only superficially resolved. Of course, the same is true of most plays with a single author as well. This project demands from its creators an unflinching dedication and honesty, an exceptional richness of imagination and erudition in their medium, and moreover a genuine need to expose themselves to these questions and ideas.

A minimum framework for developing an initial incarnation of the show would consist of three months of workshopping, six weeks of actual rehearsal, a materials (only) budget of approx. \$50,000, and a one-month run throughout which the show is further evolved. At the end of this first production, the potential for expanding the work will be assessed.

### **Distribution of Creative Roles:**

The director's principal role shall be to arrange, probe, encourage, choreograph, catalyze, guide. The material will be evolved through individual research and group exploration. Even though everyone should be willing to expose themselves, no one shall become too attached to his or her own contribution. Accordingly, any ideas or materials may be passed around, exchanged, augmented, revisioned *etc.* by other members of the group. For example: someone comes up with a scenario at a party, with the protagonist trying to interact with a number of masked 'chorus' members, *ie.* other guests, whose questions, comments and conversations become reflective of the main character's issues/state of mind. Perhaps they all take on the characteristics of various critics, shadows, voices in her head. This may trigger a parallel or different experience in other team members, in which case several scenes may be developed out of the first one and later the strongest fragments are combined.

### **Framing Concept:**

Though perhaps a trifle shop-worn, the following set-up provides a flexible framework for exploring diverse images, situations and fantasies. Moreover, it allows for several narrative strands, not all of which need to resolve within the story.

**Set-up** (framing story): psychoanalysis session  
**Characters:** analyst and client (analysand)

**Dramatic conflict/polar opposites:** a contest over the nature and meaning of life.

**Profiles:** *analyst*: science, mind/brain, needs to confirm that seat of self/meaning is neurological and behavioural, secure, self-possessed, a bit arrogant, in the head; *analysand*: lost at first, insecure, self-doubt/loathing, finds out that his needs appear spiritual/emotional/existential. Questions: what is life, who/what am I, why is it worth living, how does one live?

**Chorus** enacts dreams, scenes, etc. described during session (reveal lies/half-truths &c.) therapist may hypnotize/relax patient, who then participates in the action of the chorus as him/herself (such as chasing his alter-ego etc.). Psych. may also at times 'intervene' & alter the action, for the better or worse. As the play progresses, the separation of reality and imagination may become less clear.

One of the most profound challenges of depression/melancholy is the almost complete loss of a sense of self, and a concomitant anxiety about the fluidity and groundlessness of persona and personal meaning. Here, the fluidity of identity, as well as notions of transference, influence, gender identity &c. are represented by every member of the ensemble, in turn, taking on the role of the analyst and analysand. At some point in this daisychain of embodiments, the two actors have switched as well; at the end, they are back to the initial configuration. Through some theatrical means (could be as obvious as costume), they are identified as remaining the same characters, though their behaviour etc. may change significantly. At least some of the substitutions should occur within the framing scene (eg. hidden by the back of the analyst's chair, or during a false exit); sometimes, the switch happens after an 'inner' scene when the character returns to the analyst's space; also, during blackouts etc.

**Goals:**

reveal interior landscape/hopes/dreams/fears; perhaps patient learns that his interior reality is worth living, *does* constitute something more than absence/loss.

broader aims: reveal pitfalls/truths, absurdities and dangers of rationalizing the mind; patient/analyst relationship, ulterior motives of both *etc.* Psych. should learn s/t too. eg. a binary shift: patient from lost/self-hating to more certain (but better or worse? Does patient walk away stronger or kill self? - leave open to process), psych. from certain/authoritative to self-doubt, loss of purpose, crumbling of illusions (does analyst end up having to get therapy?).

A problem with Zimmermann's *Metamorphoses* - which is also an episodic, non-naturalistic ensemble play around a theme - is the clunky narrative framing device. It is therefore important for our show that the framing action is dramatic (subjective and dynamic) rather than narrative (omniscient, outside the action), and interesting in and of itself. This also (if desired) frees the scenes-within from having to support a storyline, to focus on poetic imagery and evocative but ambiguous action.

**Time:** While the action in the analyst's office occurs in apparent real time, it is never clear whether this is one long session or fragments of many. The play is to take place in three acts, during which an obvious progression happens (beginning, middle & end of the analysis), but the overall time-frame (an hour and a half; six weeks; six months) is left open. The period may be 1920's, 1950's, or the present.

**Style:**

Reminiscent of Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates* and *Architecture of Miracles*, as well as the work of *Carbon 14* and Robert Wilson. While the framing story of analyst and patient is enacted in a stripped-down naturalism, the 'inner' scenes are at times highly physical, balletic, stylized (*anatomical* & embodied), at others (when involving dialogue) dryly surreal (absurdist). Very large puppets/objects and shadow projections may be used. Incorporation of image-based theatre & mixed-media. Dreamlike, time (and, where possible, space) is often distorted in these 'inner' scenes - a lifetime can pass in a minute, or a split-second action can last a minute or more, through fracturing, repetition, slow-motion, conflicting versions, different perspectives *etc.* Recurring motifs and memory/dream fragments.

**Space:**

Due to the required scene-changes, effects, controlled lighting &c., the production will be staged in a proscenium theatre with a fly system. The couch and analyst's chair may be placed on an apron. The inner stage is raised, relative to the downstage area, and may consist of a number of stacked compartments, like the cross-section of a doll house or a knick-knack shelf, but more askew (like a pile of hollow building blocks).

**Cast:**

Ensemble of 7-10 mixed m/f actors play all roles, including:

patient (conscious self)  
analyst  
patient's alter-ego (may have diff. age, gender, ethnicity, historical period from patient)  
individuals in patient's story/dream/memory (half-mask)  
chorus (full mask)  
puppeteers  
visible stage crew

The **alter-ego** is not the character as s/he sees him/herself in the story, but embodies a shadow/anima/subconscious/mirror self (we want to allow a variety of incarnations and not get too technical/psycho-theoretical; this is the 'other' self we often sense accompanies, watches, guides, criticises, fights &c. the conscious 'I'). Usually masked. Not part of every 'inner' scene. Only other character that *might* enter the framing world & 'take over' from the patient once or twice.

A number of team members should either have experienced life-affecting periods of depression or lived with someone so afflicted. With other words, should ideally be able to contribute first-hand interior or exterior perspectives on the subject. Other skills that need not be shared by all, but should be present in the group: singing (esp. classical, jazz & folk); dancing (modern); gymnastics; mime/mask work. General approach will be image-based/non-naturalistic & mixed-media.

### **Other Company Members:**

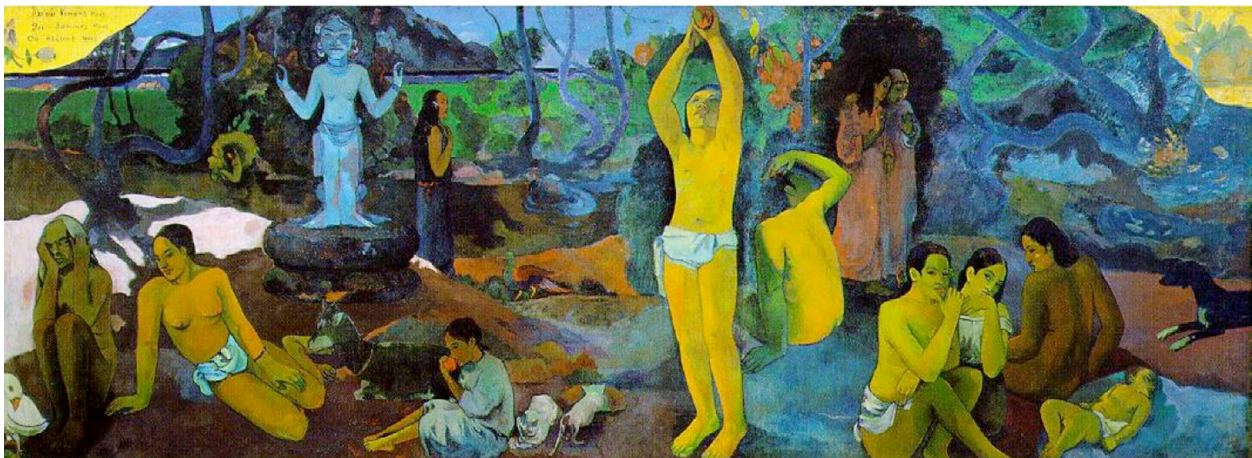
- lx, set, costume designer(s)
- choreographer
- vocal and/or music coach
- video/media artist
- sound designer
- band: strings, flute, exotic percussion (bells, gamelan, wood block ...)
- full complement of backstage & carpentry crew. minimum 4 running crew.

### **Masks:**

As part of the creative process, each cast member creates masks for (suggested list):

- critics/censors (half-mask)
- states of self/selves (full mask)
- what s/he is most afraid of
- who s/he would love to be
- who s/he is now
- his/her inner child or spirit
- his/her evil twin
- his/her guardian angel or animal totem

Some of these will be developed into the masks used in the show.



Paul Gauguin: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" (1897)



### III. Idea Seeds

#### **Opening image:**

A man runs in slow motion (by means of a flying harness) across a high-wire trying to catch a butterfly (puppetry or shadow projection); the wire ends in mid-air; he jumps after his quarry and, suspended above the abyss, traps it in his net. Blackout. When the lights come up, the butterfly catcher is on the analyst's couch (note: they *don't* talk about the image we just saw).

**First scene-within-scene:** The wall behind analyst (seated) and client (on couch) breaks apart as the two players are pulled to opposite edges of the stage. The scene thus revealed, though the context may be urban and the players in street clothes, is posed as a tableau in the manner of Gauguin's "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" (1897). The central figure (reaching for the apple) looks identical to the analysand (alternatively, analyst and analysand can be wheeled off entirely & re-enter to take their places in the tableau, in which case the analyst would pose as the blue idol). Then the scene begins.

Fragment of an allegorical **Scenario** (inspired by Douglas Adams<sup>6</sup>):

A man is being interrogated. He appears to be accused of murder (or is he recounting a dream?). He recounts how he realized a while ago that someone else was living his life. When he wakes up in the morning exhausted, he suspects that this other has already stolen and lived his day. He finds himself about to do something and then stops, realizing that it's been done before. He spends hours watching himself engaged in tasks that have nothing to do with him, that he did not want to do or initiate, as in a hypnotic daze. He suspects that this other person has tricked him into leading parts of his own, uninteresting life. Lately he has caught glimpses of the suspect, and has been following him around, trying to find out what he is up to, except his other always gives him the slip just as he is about to learn something important (or so he believes). *Eg.*, he discovers his other wrapping something, carefully packing it in a box, tying it up & surreptitiously hiding the package in a hole behind some loose bricks in an alley. When he retrieves the package, there's nothing in it. One evening he follows his other, who is all dressed up & carrying flowers, to an unknown address (suspecting this is in fact the apartment of his girlfriend of whose memory he has been robbed). When he breaks into the place, he finds only a dead bouquet in a vase on a table, a chair, a red tie hanging from an elaborate but decrepit chandelier, and a pair of black dress shoes, in an otherwise empty room. By this point, he has forgotten entirely what it is he used to do, and why. He is a ghost, a shell, a shed skin. He continues to see or hear things - a painting in an antique store, a laugh from an open window, a bicycle resting against a fountain - that he is sure belong, somehow, to *his* life, although he doesn't know how or why. Desperately he attempts to find the thief and force him to return his life, but the mystery only deepens. Until ....

inappropriate or extreme responses to **common situations** - dinner conversation, shopping, job interview, doctor's / therapist's visit, bus ride. First date. Relationship failure. Fear of intimacy, sublimated into erotic attraction to unattainable objects. Panic.

**emotional/power relationships** analyst/client could explore: cop/suspect; teacher/student; priest/sinner; parent/child

<sup>6</sup> whose novels introduced me to the profession of "metaphysical detective."

## **Gestures & Physicality:**

Example: a part of the body doesn't function, and the player tries to cope with this / hide it from others. *Eg.* a writer whose writing arm turns to rubber. She tries to make it hold a pen, poses it, tries writing with the other hand, the foot etc. etc. Someone in an authority position arrives, checking up on her; she props up her arm to support her head, pretending everything's fine etc. Comic/frustrating/desperate.

Same idea, with:

- a dancer's leg in the middle of a performance of swan lake;
- an ordinary person whose entire body, limb by limb, stops functioning on the street, but no one stops to help, so eventually, when only one arm still works, he drags himself to a manhole & disappears, whereupon someone comes & closes the cover;
- a teacher whose mouth starts talking nonsense & revealing his darkest, most embarrassing secrets in front of his class, as the students start throwing paper airplanes etc., he slowly and calmly rigs a rope & hangs himself, whereupon the buzzer sounds & the students leave;

A scene wherein making a sandwich (or some other modest task) turns into an agonizing struggle of fear and indecision, and the character ends up cowering naked in a corner.

Self encounters other self, tries to catch it. Chorus moves scenery around (screens, mirrors, doors...), so that Self keeps getting lost, only ever catches its own reflection or shadow, never its actual other. These could be connecting segments/scene changes. Play with the image of seeing your own back in the mirror.

One cast member (in rotation) at all times just stays in a designated space and emphatically does nothing, radiating loss, boredom, anxiety, stasis or indecision. The pose/actor can change while the audience's attention is distracted or the lights are down (sit, kneel, crouch, sit upside down, stand on head without apparent support in the corner, float in air, stand on back of chair, become part of the furniture or wallpaper *etc.*).

## **Other Techniques for Expression:**

- Stream-of-consciousness/automatic writing
- Group (chain) storytelling (*cf.* Keith Johnstone)
- Rivers based on social/relationship situations (individual *vs.* other/group; stranger in a strange land)
- Dreams
- Found objects from which to create experiences and memories. Invented totems.
- Unfinished sentences, aborted gestures, actions that run out in entropy.
- Obsessive exaggeration of certain details in behaviour and perception; fading/blurring of 'the big picture'
- Found sound, found text/dialogue. Layered loops.
- Bodies partly imprisoned in scenery.
- Alchemy & metamorphosis
- Distorted sense of time/temporality

### **Absurd encounters in a search for meaning:**

- A bird rests on a rock & complains life's too short; the rock retorts that, in 20,000 years, it hasn't been anywhere. An argument ensues as to who's seen more of the world.
- Atlas, returning with the golden apples and realizing he has nothing left to do, wants the sky back from Hercules. But Hercules is sick of running around the world doing his ridiculous labours, and would rather be in a position as important as holding up the sky. As they wrestle for position, they let go and forget about the firmament, which remains floating exactly where it was before.
- God and the Devil in couple's counselling, Buddha as therapist; God complains that their relationship has become too predictable; the devil charges God with being emotionally abusive; both accuse each other of taking their differences out on their children; Buddha gets bored with their bickering, puts a mirror in his chair & leaves to go fishing with Jesus; God & the devil don't notice & keep arguing at the mirror.
- A meeting of the heads of the world's great religions, discussing over an opulent supper the superiority of their respective ontologies. Arguments flare and chaos ensues. The servants cower under the table.

### **The Meaning of Why:**

[from: *The Y(i) Project*, part 1 ("12 Moons"):

**Yi** (Chinese=*change*):

- The eternal question
- The male chromosome
- Forking, branching into possibilities and parallel universes
- Decisions
- yes/no, on/off
- Heads/tails
- The *I Ching* (YiJing: Book of Changes)
- DNA & Amino Acids (The Book of Life)
- *Bu*- the character for divining or predicting, choosing ]

**Y:**

why?; a fork in the road; 'I' splitting; tree; reaching up; trinity; spokes of a wheel; delicate balance; cup; wishbone ...

#### **IV. Personal Reflections** (June-November 2004)

The primary purpose for creating, to me, seems to be to plunge oneself into a canvas or a space or a world where one is, for a time, blissfully insulated from the strife and folly of reality and able to exist by one's own rules, or at least by the rules of someone else one fundamentally agrees with.

Being "depressed" implies, among other things, being utterly bereft of stories. To be sure, most of us live our daily lives unaware of our own story, but when you are depressed, you are deeply aware of the *lack* of it. Not only is your own story beyond your grasp, but, while you are on occasion able to engage with the stories of others, both live and literary, they are both unable to sustain you for long, and unable to penetrate you with whatever their meaning might be. You live, in your head, in a small, dull space, without doors or windows (or, at best, a window on a meadow without signs, a window moreover that cannot be opened), its walls narrow and blank, with nothing to hold your interest, without a sense of purpose or wonder. This does not make for very engaging dramatic material. At best, you are able to generate a few thoughts from arbitrarily chosen relics, a stone, a chair, a picture, but you soon find yourself rearranging these in arbitrary futility. You are unable to reach beyond the obvious, unable to imbue the texture of living with enough resistance to prevent slippage. The walls are smooth and featureless, at times they taunt you with a flicker of detail, only to turn blank again upon approach. You are mired in a pointlessness that you know to be, itself, pointless, lazy, a self-imposed mask, but you can't pick yourself up long enough to sculpt any features. You just want to go back to bed, even though lying there is almost as unbearable as sitting here, staring into, not exactly nothing, but rather a confused muddle, a detritus of sense.

You suspect that, if you could only let it all go, simplify things, get back to basics, you would find a foothold, you'd at least be able to just exist. Clean the floor. Mow the lawn. Later, maybe, get some clay and make a pot, or even draw something, anything. Sit outside, motionless, long enough for the world to speak to you, whisper in your ear something that would comfort you, fill you with a sense of belonging. But you would have to let it all go first, stop worrying about the work to be done, the expectations, the demands on your competence, the assignments that require logic and at least a modicum of creative impulse. Meanwhile, you sit here, having absolutely nothing to say.

The heavy heart: The outside of you feels numb and somehow suspended; your shell appears to recede, to expand in diameter, but the actual movement is centripetal: you are being sucked into the black vacuum within, by the gravitational pull of your dark-matter heart. Though your outside feels brittle and insubstantial, like an old balloon barely adrift, your being is pulled down, down by the knotted weight inside that crushes you to the floor. Too heavy to move, that gas-filled balloon listlessly tugging at the rock in its bowels that anchors it to the ground, a cruel joke played by a wilful child.

From behind this confusing, drowsy, draining veil you stare dumbly at the world, and don't know how to go on, even how to articulate, because articulation could pull you through. You are not supposed to feel sad, that's what's wrong with you. Others get scared because you pull them in with you, no matter how hard they try to love you, to help you, you render them helpless, and they recoil. Since they love you, they must conclude that you are being selfish, wrapped up in yourself, always needing, unable to see how much they love you, it is a terrible burden, this indebtedness that you cannot repay, this effect you have of making everyone miserable. You realize that, as a person who suffers from depression, you indeed see the world differently, but trying to see things their way merely makes you more frustrated, more depressed. In your failure, you withdraw still further, while doing your best (badly) not to make it show on the outside.

You try to "function," to fulfill your tasks, not to kill yourself with cigarettes, not to waste the opportunities you are given to grow, and sometimes you glimpse just enough of a purpose to keep going, despite the long dark spaces in-between. Because you know, because you told, that those dark spaces are a lie of your mind, and that there is so much to live for, so much to experience, so much you have to give. Sometimes you suspect that, if you could only extract yourself from their structure, their demands, their "system," that you could break through. Maybe by not talking, not writing (writhing) in their language, but by listening deep within, you can discover the buried impulse, nurse it and let it flower. But as soon as you have to connect with the outside, to reason, to sell yourself, to worry about "making a living," or even "making a point," you despair again. Reason and clarity are so elusive, so alien, so impossibly hard to construct. So, finally, with not a single idea in your vast, empty head except this sadness, you figure out, maybe this is what I have to talk about, work it through, like the poets, who alone are still (on occasion), allowed to chew on this, this melancholia, I guess because poems, generally, are short, and they, the readers, can skim over the surface, get their feet wet with sadness, but safely make it to the other shore before they get sucked down, before they drown (would they drown if they were not afraid of drowning, or walk on water? Who knows. I don't even, as a rule, read poems, I do the same thing, I just avoid feeling the hurt and daze on). But maybe this is the time, in-between those "projects" that you somehow negotiate to keep you afloat, when there is nothing left and all is confusion, when the next step seems impossibly far away, to anatomize what's left of yourself.

Already you become worried that you're spreading it on too thick, that you're indulging yourself, that these words are taking on an agenda of their own. That's why you're afraid of words, because they're so impossible to control, to keep pure, to make sure they don't just take off on their own and make a mockery of the truth. "Stream of consciousness," indeed. Gao calls it "stream of language," maybe because he found out just that, that the words have a mind of their own. If you manage to whip them into a frenzy of meaning, is that meaning still truthful? Does it matter? Isn't the whole purpose of working collectively to manufacture meaning, spin it into the room, no-one knows where it came from, exactly, but if it seems to say something important, does it really matter if that's what you meant to mean? If its beauty resonates, isn't

that enough, or rather, isn't that more than you could otherwise have dreamed of? Isn't that what Lepage is talking about? The most successful moments, the ones you chose to work in theatre, with other people, for, are those when you discover that you have brought into being something unforeseen, yet while maintaining some sort of personal integrity. Buut the problem with sadness (well, of depression and anxiety, anyway; let's leave the term "sadness," for the sake of this discussion, to describe a potential state of illumination, rather than the state from which you're trying to find it) is, often you don't know whether you're the best judge of that.

It's raining outside. Thing is, rain doesn't make you particularly sad. When the rain stops and the sun breaks through the clouds, that is the moment that makes your heart ache, presumably with its beauty, the way a beautiful young man thrusts you into the negative pull of his illusory unattainability (illusory, because it's all in your perception, it really has nothing to do with him, he could be a total swine). It's like inverse raytracing in computer graphic rendering, the vectors from your imaginary eye draw the picture, from your precise vantage point in space; shift a little, and the carefully placed reflections and glow are gone. At least you think that's how it is, because you think you can't handle any more of it, though you've hardly experienced it at all yet, so you turn away and light a cigarette. Could you make it through prolonged exposure?