



*Annali*

## IMAGES OF MYTH REVERIE WATER (A. Riva 2010)

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*by Alessandro Riva*

In 1988, the journal *Nature* published an article that caused a sensation. This article, signed by the French immunologist Jacques Benveniste, supported a very peculiar and extremely meaningful theory – which would later give rise to deep divergences, accusations, counter-accusations and denials in the international scientific community. This theory became known as the discovery of “water memory”.

Water molecules, according to Benveniste, possessed some “memory” of the antibodies they had come into contact with. As if all the water on earth – the water of the rivers, the lakes, the sea, the one flowing from mountain springs as well as from our kitchen taps – were aware of what it had seen or “felt” on its way, and retained a faint memory of the things it had come into contact with. As if water had a memory, thus, in a wider sense, maybe also a conscience, a thought – in brief, an *unconscious*. Gaston Bachelard is the philosopher who best meditated upon the deep meaning of drea-

ming, of daydreaming, or rather of that peculiar process which can be hardly translated and that in French is called *rêverie* (maybe it might be called dreamy daydream; this has much to do with poetic imagination and also with letting oneself go to poetic creation, contemplation and memory – when “a little bit of night matter” remains “forgotten in the clarity of the day”; and enables poets, dreamers and artists to get rid of the function of reality, in order to enter a psychic state when even the real world “is absorbed by the world of imagination”, and in which “memories are fixed in overview pictures, scenarios prevail over drama, sad memories fade away into melancholy”); Gaston Bachelard, indeed, wrote many important pages about the imaginative and poetic power inside water images, and the very matter of water. Memory, water and poetic imagination are, according to Bachelard, three closely connected terms.

“There is a water sleeping at the bottom of each me-

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mory", the philosopher writes in *The oetics of Reverie*, following the same path as those oets who, by and in their works, bear witness to "an aspiration to go beyond the limit, to go upstream, to recover the vast lake with still waters where time rests" – that lake is always in us "as the place where a motionless childhood still resides". The water Bachelard talks about in his metaphor is still, calm (an *eau dormante*), because it is deep, deeper than the very nature of our real memory – a water prior to the being, or "*below the being and above the nothingness*" – that searches for not only our real recollections, our real childhood, the one we really lived, but also a melting pot of possible childhoods, of imagined lives – plausible if not real -, and of "recollections going beyond our memory, of dreams which have never disappeared".


"Childhood", the philosopher writes, "is a human water, a water which comes out of the shadows"; and this childhood "of mists and flashes", this life "experienced in the slowness of limbos", "grants depth to the birth", or rather to thousands of possible births, because – by our own ability to daydream, or by the work of artists who are able to start these psychic mechanisms inside us -, we give birth to thousands of other possible lives besides the one we really lived: "We originated so many beings!", Bachelard writes. "So many lost springs went on flowing! The *rêverie* of our past, the *rêverie* in search of childhood, seems to give space to lives which have not been lived, but just imagined. [...] In the *rêverie* we get in contact with possibilities which destiny was not able to take advantage of. A big paradox emerges from our childhood *rêveries*: this dead past has a future in us, the future of its living images, the future of *rêveries* that is opening up in front of each recovered image".

Since remote ancient times, the image of water – just like the image of flight – has carried out the function of archetype of man's deep conscience, as well as of its own origin. Countless water images originated some of the most ancient myths in the history of mankind. *Ancient* Greeks considered the Ocean as the origin of the

Gods and all the creatures, even the Genesis describes the Spirit of God "hovering over the waters" when the earth was still "formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters". In the *Vedas*, the sacred texts of Hinduism, instead, we can read "an expanse of water with no light" being the prime cause of everything. On the other hand, the amniotic fluid water is where every human form of life originates – it is our origin and the "zero point" of our conscience. There is an extraordinary ancient Hindu myth in which the fluid, magic, irrational reality of water is extremely meaningful and symbolic: a myth in which reality is defined as the origin of the magical consequence of a water dream, where the real and the dreamed intersect until you cannot distinguish one from another anymore: and the unifying element is, once again, just water.

This myth is named after the figure of saint Mârkandeya, and his journey in the infinite waters of god Vishnu's body: Mârkandeya sees the body of the god asleep in the middle of a vast expanse of water – a deep, black, primordial water -, and he mistakes him for a mountain range; he approaches him, then the god swallows him, spits him out, and swallows him again. The sight of primordial waters is in itself, according to saint Mârkandeya, a sign of confusion: he does not know if the waters, and himself along with them, were the work of a dream – the dream of the god who dreams the world, the waters from which the world originated, and us, who are integral parts of the world. Water is therefore the symbol of a birth – the birth of the world, and, along with it, of ourselves – as well as the image of a loss: the loss of the conscience of the world – the real world, as we are used to knowing it – in favour of a truer and deeper revelation: the cosmos and human nature. In the vast and deep waters of the unconscious lays the risk of losing your own earthly nature, to somehow rejoin the depth of the cosmos, and thus the secret and truer core of your own spiritual nature.

Annalù has lived all her life with her feet immersed in water and a good head on her shoulders – just like Cecilia Scacerni, the main character of the Italian lite-



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ature masterpiece by Riccardo Bacchelli, the Mill by the river o (unfortunately not enough appreciated and studied). Annalù's destiny, though, was not to be born along *the river Po*, that crosses and gives name to one of the most flourishing Italian plain – the Po valley – but along the river Piave, whose name recalls many stories, battles, adventures, disillusion and hopes (as well as suffering and deaths) that make up not only our history but also what is called our "identity" – in this case, national identity. Annalù lives along the Piave, in a ile-house. In the past, it was made of wood, today it is built of bricks. A house, as she tells us, that "breathes" because of all the stories that have passed over the river and have been lived, "and has the same salty smell of the water. A water," Annalù says, "that is green-blue and because we are near the sea, sometimes 'runs upstream' (it has the power to reverse) and is salty, sometimes it 'runs downstream' and is sweet".

Annalù does not live in any house: she lives in a house that once belonged to her father, and before that, to her grandmother.

Her grandmother's name was Anna but she went by the name of "Nanea". She was a "boatwoman" and her job was to ferry whoever passed that way from one side of the river to the other. Annalù has lived through the stories she heard and collected in the family, thousands of river stories. She has listened to them, she has re-told them, she has re-lived them, literally. In retrospect, she has been part of them, she has been leas and excited by them and has suffered, recording those songs, those passages, those isolated images, stuck to the retina through old black and white photos found in a drawer. Photos of kids who cross the river, balancing on an old boat, a happy and carefree youth from another era; or a guy taking a girl in his arms and laughing, laughing, laughing, happy in his youth, a youth lasting a moment, and then disappearing; young days of the past, on the river, memories of other times, other clothes, other hair-dos, other atmospheres, certainly: yet, the same water, the same river, the same house as today, made those memories her own, and allowed the sedimentation and

the digging of a small place inside her, a remote and inaccessible place, made of that impalpable and airy substance of dreams and ancestral memories – lived or imagined memories, since even memories experienced by others, at times, can become our own, and dig a safe and boundless place in the deep water of our unconscious.

Here are some of her grandmother's memories, belonging to the Piave " *...many foreigners fell into the water... most of them were drunk. Carrying their bodies ashore was such a hard work, I don't know how I managed! At the end I got used to it, but the first years, at night, I kept thinking about them and I could not sleep. I thought: how could I have handled all this? If it only were for one year, two, three... it would have been easier. But I have lived buried for thirty years!*" Thirty years along the river. The boatwoman. Water. Whirlpools. Streams. Floods. And the river tricks... The deep, twirling, endless water of the river...

*"In the fifties the Piave shores were like a beach... until Luigi drowned. Before that, from noon to three, four in the afternoon there were forty, fifty people going there. Moreover, every family had its access to the shore for their animals. It was always so crowded – so joyful. That eriod was a happy time. After the accident, since the very following day, no one came anymore. Death had traumatized everyone."*

*Text of the catalog "Images of water, myth and Reverie" by A. Riva. Personal Exhibition, Wannabee Gallery, Milan, 2010.*