THE GODDESS DOES PLAY DICE: CREATIVITY AND NON-INTENTIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY PAGAN RITUAL

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Abstract
Sometimes referred to as open source religions, contemporary Paganisms are under continuous construction. In this paper I will discuss, from a psychological perspective, the relation between creativity and Pagan ritual practice through notions like novelty, improvisation and non-intentionality. By elaborating on the plumber/diviner dichotomy in the work of Ronald Grimes, these notions will be fleshed out as practical and experiential aspects of the roles of the participants. On a grander scale, the discussion of ritual creativity will be tied in with the contemporary Paganisms’ reconstructionism, egalitarianism, eclecticism, and their notion of immanent divinity, making a case for the importance of the phenomenon of creativity in interdisciplinary ritual studies.

Keywords
Contemporary Paganism, Creativity, Imagination, Improvisation, Non-intentionality, Ritual

Introduction

Perhaps somewhat different to the other contributions – this chapter has a distinct theoretical flavour, and seems to emphasise universals rather than particulars when it comes to Pagan ritual. Perhaps this is the price for interdisciplinarity, since I am situated halfway between cultural psychology and religious studies. Reductionism is a dirty word in some quarters. Still, I feel that universality does not have to amount to the same, and my take on ritual is certainly not one of cognitivism, but rather appreciating the emergent properties of the symbolic interactions between people in a ritual environment. Change, development and novelty, then, are neither situated in the heads nor present in culture, but come into existence when religion is enacted. These patterns are constrained by the physical environment too. Especially contemporary Paganism seems apt to embrace these adaptations over time; creativity is a central tenet in their praxis, and increasingly accepted as such. In a recent emic publication Wicca has been depicted as progressive witchcraft in the sense that the religion is acknowledged as changeable in nature – or even evolving – as a continuous response to the needs of the day (Farrar and Bone 2004). Creativity cannot but play a central role here. As I will show however, the effort put into renewing rituals, paradoxically may require passively inviting in change as much as actively pursuing it.

What is creativity?

But what then, is creativity? Although a full-fledged definition of the term is way beyond the scope of this paper, some descriptive elements are indispensable for a correct understanding of the present employment of the term in psychology. Both originality and usefulness determine if the label creativity will be granted – a duality on which most researchers agree (Cropley 1999; Mayer 1999; Sternberg and Lubart 1999; Gaut 2003, in Beaney 2005). In terms of the present conference, creativity may be understood as an effort to adjust aspects of the outer world to the inner, or vice versa. Creativity, then, is mostly understood not only as an individual, cognitive phenomenon, but is argued to have a social side as well. As can be observed in fields as far apart as art and science, critical acclaim is required for any idea to be judged creative to begin with (Boden 1994; Cropley 1999). Especially in a ritual context relevancy or appropriateness are important since the rituals in the contemporary Pagan context I observe them typically only have
participants – no audience of believers. Pagan democracy, as I will explain later, gives each a voice. Eclectic initiatives eventually will die out if they are not adapted to the requirements of a specific group. Here shared meanings constrain and enable any form of creativity to develop in the first place. Creativity, then, unavoidably takes place in a specific domain which is governed by tacit and explicit regulations, tastes, interests, traditions, styles and is essentially wrought in the idiom of a generative system of rules (e.g. mathematical rules, grammatical rules, musicological rules, or in this case: ritual rules) from which new structures emerge (Boden 1994). In contemporary Paganism this domain is formed by the available books, schools, and influential Pagans vis-à-vis the demands and demand characteristics of modern society.

Another aspect of creativity, which may be easily overlooked, is imagination and fantasy (Gilhooly 1996; Singer 1999; Beaney 2005), which is pertinent in contemporary Paganism. Most approaches to creativity take it to be an active process, leading up to a tangible product. But creativity may also apply to an authentic conception of a situation or an original association that can set the stage for any action that amounts to any concrete novelty. There is more to imagination and fantasy than mere association. Partly these activities are employed in order to relate to reality symbolically (Wartofsky 1979). Therefore sometimes a real-world space is arranged to act as a stage with requisites for a serious game of make-believe (Gilhooly 1996). If all the parties involved agree to the rules of the world as-if, the invented reality becomes veridical in its consequences. Here we see an attempt at resolution of the difference between the real and the ideal, here in the guise of the world as-is versus the world as-if. Passively, imagination and fantasy relate to creative receptivity (Ward, Smith et al. 1999). That is, to interpret objects and situations beyond the obvious or the shared, to open up to what may result in a direct experience of novelty or, by suspension of disbelief, may result in a phenomenological glance of its essence. Any onlooker of the Wiccan ritual of drawing down the moon, in which the Goddess is drawn into the body of the High Priestess, will be trying to make sense of the performance in terms of his or her prior beliefs, or see these altered or influenced by the disclosed divine knowledge. Creativity here resides in the appropriating the enacted material to his or her personal take on the religion. On the active side, the High Priestess is improvising – yet another feat of creativity, generating new structures within what I above have so plastically called the ‘generative system of rules’.

Here we touch upon Ronald Grimes’ distinction between plumbers and diviners in ritual creativity (Grimes 2000). The first model is a hands-on approach to ritual: repair aspects of existing rituals that do not work as they once did, or invent novel rituals to suit new needs. The emphasis is on the how-to knowledge, and the practicalities involved in the actual preparation of a ritual, like the gathering of the necessary objects to prepare the ritual space. The diviner approach, related to the performance and receptivity, is entirely different. Prudence and allusion are its hallmarks. The diviner will allow creativity to flow inside a ritual by undergoing spontaneous irrigations of coincidence, non-intentionality, and gleaning emergent meanings to contrive new vistas and understandings of the sacred (think high priestess here). Whereas the plumber is an active and practical agent, the diviner is receptive, interpretative and inclined towards the noetic, tapping into the experiential knowledge aspect of ritual. Typically we will encounter the plumber outside the ritual, and the diviner inside, even though the opposite is by no means impossible. We should not forget that both plumber and diviner may house in the same person, manifesting themselves when the need arises. In the end, each Pagan may simultaneously be originator and beholder of the creative output generated in and around a ritual.

**Improvisation and ritual knowledge**

Let’s look a bit further at the issue of improvisation, which may be the central tenet of ritual creativity. The experienced tension between real and ideal can be found in the misfit between thinking and doing, between beliefs, and acting these out. Apart from the neatly circumscribed impro-
visatory episodes in ritual, where no explicit prior storyboard exists, the tension may refer to the unequal distribution of knowledge between participants or the unevenness of ritual goals and personal intentions; the tensions between the inner and outer world, if you will. The topic of ritual knowledge and the way it flows and grows to and from the participants, is also central to the issue of creativity in ritual; knowledge not only in the sense of what is conveyed in the ritual proper, but also in the form of experiencing, adjusting, sensing, and sharing of the material.

The question whether rituals need to change or not if participants are to gain ritual knowledge has attracted some debate. Jennings (1982) has argued that ritual as a means of religious self-discovery and gaining an associated worldview can be overlooked if we take ritual to be a fixed sequence of symbolic actions. To him, the element of inquiry and discovery requires the ritual to change over time, since otherwise ritual activity is no more than the transmission of earlier established knowledge, with no new knowledge gained. Contrasting Williams and Boyd (2008), likening ritual to the concept of a masterpiece in art, have suggested that a continued exposure to a ritual may yield a gradual gaining of knowledge of that ritual. In art, they claim, the eventual aesthetic appreciation of an artwork – grasping it – is a function of the unchanging nature of its displayed intent. Although it is not my aim to delve into this discussion, there are four comments about the claims I have to make. First, given the knowledge differences between participants, or their perspectives any similar ritual will yield different knowledge to different persons. Therefore, the possibility of different interpretations already releases the ritual from a required change in that context. Second, and contrarily, rituals do in fact change over time, so the argument that rituals do not need to change is largely irrelevant. Third, the link between art and rituals is not straightforward, since some masterpieces require performances, whereas others, like the visual arts and literature, consist of unchanging works. Fourth, we must distinguish between the sorts of knowledge gained in ritual. Not only factual data about the teachings of a religious tradition, or the ritual script, but also the coming to know the engagement with the spiritual “in ways not reducible to propositions” (Williams & Boyd 1993 in Williams & Boyd 2008: p. 295, n39) – in other words, to directly experience the numinous. In the end, then, both Jennings (1982) on the one hand, and Williams and Boyd on the other, may be referring to different kinds of ritual knowledge, rendering their positions more compatible than both sides have anticipated. For our present discussion, appreciating the difference between experiential knowledge, and how-to knowledge is sufficient, but indispensable with regard to ritual creativity.

The gaining of experiential knowledge as a function of improvisation/performance – the transformation of mental states to objects or performances (or: doing something rather than thinking it) necessarily introduces redundancy. For instance, an intended gesture may be carried out rather differently, or – in the art of painting – the quality of the paint (e.g. its thickness) interacts with the technique with which it is applied. Most importantly, the creator him- or herself is not always in the position to execute his or her intentions. Sometimes the creation requires more effort than can be anticipated; sometimes it just turns out different because of limitations in the execution (e.g. a lack of technique). Anyhow, the creative process seems to have a certain ballistic quality about it. Very much like a ballistic missile, the trajectory of which, once fired, cannot be altered, and becomes wholly subject to environmental conditions. In a very similar vein there is an aspect of randomness, of chance, in the act of creation – especially when the goal is not a

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1 Williams and Boyd use the phrase ‘exhibiting aesthetic necessity’, but I find that it masks a weakness in their argument, since there may not be an intent that is displayed. By calling it an ‘aesthetic necessity’, they undeniably claim that people will arrive at a similar understanding/appreciation/experience of a piece of art.

2 With regard to music and theatre, more akin to ritual, matters are indeed very complex. Directors and performers alike have to deal with issues like the differences between text and performance, the level of openness to change and improvisation the composer allowed, and not in the least any discrepancy between the zeitgeist in which the work was conceived and that in which it is performed. In his aptly named book ‘Subsequent Performances’ Jonathan Miller (1986) explores the last problem. Given the fact that in many of the performing arts works outlast their creator, they have to be reinterpreted and recreated by later generations, posing questions about intentions, aesthetics, actuality, and appropriateness.
neatly locatable target. The cliché of the book that writes itself may well pertain to the non-intentional aspects of the creation of a story, as do declarations of artists about muses and inspiration, outside his or her control. I will come back to this non-intentional aspect that comes with each creative act at the end.

Precisely at the point where creativity is a shot in the dark, because there is no target identified, exactly on the spot where the importance of ballistics overrules that of the missile, is where we can locate this twin brother of creativity, improvisation. In much the same way Ingold and Hallam (2007) argue that improvisation arises when the emphasis is on the process of creation, rather than on its product. They frown at the idea of the polarity between novelty and convention, and hence reject the distinction between innovation and improvisation, in which only the former is granted the ‘true creativity’ status, much like Boden’s (1994) ‘genuine creativity’. In her rendering of the term not the generation of new forms within a system of rules is labelled creative, but the overcoming of the rules themselves. Thinking out of the box is presented like an all-or-none phenomenon, whereas Ingold and Hallam hold that “[people] are compelled to improvise, not because they are operating on the inside of an established body of convention, but because no system of codes, rules and norms can anticipate every possible circumstance” (p. 2). That is, Ingold and Hallam imply that the system of rules is an emergent property of the social interactions and improvisations. The question remains, however, to what extent the ritual environment does not entail ‘an established body of convention’. Perhaps the overcoming of the system of rules is a process that entails many instances of improvisation within ritual space, likening the practice over time to a living, breathing creature, eventually escaping his cage by trial and error. Seemingly, the ballistic properties of a single creative process hold for a series as well.

Improvisation relates to ritual in two ways. First, pertaining to performance and mostly, but not solely to activity inside rituals, improvisation is like jamming musicians or brainstorming managers. Paradoxically, the embeddedness in a system of rules, determining the degrees of freedom, is crucial for this aspect of improvisation. What the rules consist of, however, is fluent. It may be a topic under consideration, limiting the scope of the contributions in the brainstorm session, or it may be the tempo and rhythm provided by the drums, which constrains a solo effort by a guitarist. In method acting, very relevant to the study of ritual, an actor generates credible behaviour of a character, outside any script, but with the knowledge of the personality and other specifics of that character. Ingold and Hallam (2007) made four points about improvisation, all of which can be retraced here. First, improvisation is generative, in that it contributes to the body of (a specific) culture. Second, they stress its relationality, referring to the continual reciprocal adjusting and attuning in relation to others in the process. Third, improvisation is temporal. Simply put, it has duration which cannot be reduced to a specific moment in time. Fourth, improvisation is what Ingold and Hallam call ‘the way we work’. This last point can be explained by its similarity to my earlier discussion of non-intentionality. Frankly, I believe that the first point, improvisation being generative, ties in with this discussion as well for the simple reason that both being generative and ‘the way we work’ very much boil down the same problem of the emergence of structure in a creative process.

Secondly, apart from its link with performance, improvisation also relates to ritual in the sense of perpetual reinvention. Although rituals are ‘handed down the generations’, they started somewhere. Rituals change because times change, and Grimes’ (2000) plumber will fix shortcomings in rituals, from augmenting liturgy, via translating sacred texts, to dreaming up new rituals to better cater for contemporary needs. If there is anywhere, where the generative system of rules is itself revised, it is with the act of creative invention that takes place outside of the ritual. Emphasis is put on the product, rather than the process, and improvisation in this sense may resemble the neat construction of novelty, purposeful and reflected upon. How tempting to call it innovation rather than improvisation! We should not forget, however, that aspects like construction, sense of purpose and reflection in their turn are outcomes of improvisation as well. Like I stated earlier, creativity is a social phenomenon, and its intentions arise out of a tension between the real
and ideal. If we want to catch a glimpse of creativity in ritual, we have to look outside the ritual as well, to the narratives from which initiatives of renewal emerge. Invention and performance are two sides of the same medal of improvisation, which finally surfaces as the *modus operandi* of creativity.

**Why is contemporary Paganism a suitable domain for the study of ritual creativity?**

What has been called Neopaganism by American scholars, and contemporary Paganism by European scholars (see Strmiska 2005), is a movement consisting of various European modern nature religions and associated spiritual practises (Pearson 2005; van Gulik 2010). These strands all share a fundamental attitude in their reverence for nature; inspiring activism as much as religiosity. Contemporary paganism consists of very young traditions, even if they seek commonalities or even continuity with mostly European indigenous pre-Christian religions (Harvey 1997). The most important strands of contemporary Paganism are Wicca, Asátru, and Druidism. The latter two are reconstructionist movements, reaching back to their Germanic and Celtic pasts, respectively. Wicca is now viewed as an invented tradition, formed during the mid-20th century, even if some incorporated elements are older (Hutton 1999). There is an interesting similarity between the development of these religions and that of genres in the arts (e.g. music). The common ground of art and religion is their ‘experientiality’: both celebrate an aspect of some aspect of the outer world, which is an ends in itself, and as the kind of knowledge that cannot be broken down into propositions, as I discussed earlier. Both explore or are the outcomes of exploration of a meaningful relationship between a person and the world: both concern existentialities. Psychologically, the only difference between religion and worldly art is the interpretation of the experience they convey.

If we look at contemporary Pagan expressions of religion, we are tempted to see them as part of a genre that is now in the early stages of the phase of crystallization. Paganism diversifies, but is already assignable as a distinct style of religion. The crystallization phase with its associated fragmentation, experimentation and diversification makes paganism an excellent domain for the study of ritual creativity, since new rituals are still formed, and older ones have not yet reached maturity. That is, the body of ritual is still open to renewal, and their ramifications are continuing to this day. In addition, the reaching back to the past to find expressions of proto-paganism as a way to establish or enhance its religious identity adds to the growth of the movement as a whole. Clearly, this aspect shows that part of contemporary paganism is still in the formative phase. Some of the retrospection even takes the form of establishing a justification of the belief system as a whole.

What can also be called the adaptationist/purist distinction relates to Paganism’s general pluralism: many paths are accepted as valid, and people holding different beliefs may practise ritual together without much problem. The constant possibility of mismatch, and negotiation around ritual practice has the appearance of a Grimesian plumber’s guild in which standards, new ideas and personal input of rituals (even religion as a whole) are discussed, transmitted, acclaimed or refuted. The rise of the internet is an important ‘technocultural’ factor amidst these processes of exchange (Cowan 2005; van Gulik 2010). Much faster than books, more interactive than authors reacting on each other, and more democratic, pagan discussion boards are places where the ‘plumber’s guild’ holds its incessant debates. Given the respect for personal differences that goes

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3 This analogy is, however, troublesome for various reasons. First, religion may well strengthen itself by the constant repetition of its sameness, perpetuating what may be seen as the perennial wisdom. Second, the viability of a religion is not solely dependent on its internal structure, but also to historic context. Not so much a demand for renewal just for the sake of it, but other needs (i.e. external forces) determine whether a religion survives. Third, religion, and even some of its rituals, art, scripture, and beliefs, can best be seen as discrete works of art, not so much as a genre. Just as an evergreen never loses its appeal, whereas emulations of its style become stale, a religion or religious
with expressive individualism, and given the – for the greater part – absence of a uniform theology in Pagan discussion, these are a seething cauldron of experimental and creative potential. Still, the internet, as well as with many open ceremonies, are interfaces between the in-group and the out-group too. Through self-organisation i.e. in the form of the rise of influential Pagan thinkers, the sanctioning of the so-called fluffybunnies, or acquiring executive functions in organisations or in the on-line community, democracy determines what opinions will prevail. Interestingly, potentially all non-initiatory paths may develop through these interactions, whereas democracy takes the form of egalitarianism in concrete groups of initiatory paths. Here the input from the coven, grove or hearth members is equally accepted and appreciated, sometimes even to the point that each member is expected or appointed to contribute something appropriate to his or her role or talent.

Egalitarianism contributes to the ritual plumber, and again furnishes creativity because principally all input may be accepted. Paganism, lacking a genuine priesthood (although some pagans do have a large impact on Paganism’s self-definitions), therefore reaps the benefits of group effort. Egalitarianism also contributes to the ritual diviner, since first-person experiences are accepted as valid in their consequence of shared meaning (the possibly differing theological interpretations notwithstanding). Since much of the ritual activity in Paganism amounts to techniques for altering consciousness religious experiences, or even mystical ones, are actively pursued, and hence potentiality for renewal is built-in in the liturgy. For most of the expected experiences ready-made explanations exist, and much of the perception of the participants can be explicated in a narrative of personal and spiritual growth and the tuning in to a relationship with sacred nature. In addition, quite contrarily to the egalitarian principle, differences in seniority exist on a loosely regulated hierarchical level. In Wicca, for instance, the high priest and high priestess, in their office as elders supervise the ceremonial proceedings, and guide the less experienced participants through ritual to becoming a full-fledged ‘witch’ (in the case of neophytes), maintaining a fruitful and vital relationship with the ‘full member’, and aiding in the preparation of any member that may wish to be initiated into high priesthood themselves. Given the explicit adjustment of the personal with the public and the sacred (i.e. in the cycle of the year), regular plumbing is required to fit the ritual to the participants and vice versa. This unequal distribution of knowledge adds to the already prominent influence of the individual to any rite, feeding the polyvalence of creative output, and perpetuating a generative off-balance theology, that as a result remains in flux. As a consequence, doctrines, teachings and beliefs cannot be pinpointed to a definite understanding for each, but their meaning is more likely to pulsate, rotate, expand and contract around its centre, introducing some non-intentionality in ritual renewal.

Perhaps more importantly, the high priest and high priestess also are the chief diviners of their rituals. Although some of their experiential knowledge is acquired through the very techniques to alter consciousness that all share (e.g. grounding, centring, group meditation, spiral dance et cetera), the meaning of the knowledge attained is less prone to be negotiated, but rather used to teach, instruct and guide the junior members. But the most crucial divinatory aspect in Wiccan ritual are ‘drawing down the moon’ proceedings, I mentioned before wherein the moon, as the Great Goddess is drawn down into the body of the high priestess, who then becomes the Goddess for the duration of the ritual. Drawing down the moon is an empty slot in the ritual, in that it lacks an explicit script apart from the drawing itself. That is, as the incarnated Goddess, the high priestess will improvise and the words spoken, gestures made, and movements performed are spontaneous creative acts, which may not only influence the rest of the ritual, but may gradually alter the belief system as a whole depending on how the drawing down the moon is implemented by a coven. Much of what holds as pagan beliefs, then, is the direct experience of perceived and ecstatically felt, and creatively reconstructed on the spot. Similar mystical approaches or episodes exist in other Pagan practices as well, apart from the method acting or ‘as-if’ performance of the high priestess; a common denominator is the empty slot, not unlike a solo
spot, in which some theme may be developed as it goes. Ritual creativity is built-in in pagan ceremony, it seems.

A last reason why paganism is a suitable domain for the study of ritual creativity lies in the emphasis on aesthetics within the provisory framework of pagan ceremony, whether it be in spaces and places, art, idolatry or ritual regalia. Paganism, generally lacking buildings dedicated to worship, transforms houses into temples, makes itself at home in a natural place or stone circle. Rituals, then, are typically performed in blended spaces, where the profane is consecrated. One can imagine that elements of everyday life leak into the ritual space or contrary, that the sacred-ness of the space enters into the ordinary world. In addition, lacking houses of worship, many objects need to be devised, carried around, and placed to be appropriated for their use inside a ritual. As with space itself, the objects will be consecrated with care, as will eventually the participants. Still, given the immanent divinity in paganism, the gods coincide with the tangible world, and therefore images of deities and symbols of divinity are readily accepted. Paganism, in this very sense, is idolatrous, but strictly that word loses its meaning when creator and creation are looked upon as one and the same. The very process of creating this sort of imagery simultaneously distances the maker from the product and what is revered, and on the other hand, through the process of experience offers intimacy with it.

Conclusion

The time has come to wrap up. I do so by returning to the non-intentional aspect of creativity I mentioned earlier. Regardless of our intentions, both the things we do and their products always seem to turn out different than what we expected. Or rather: they move beyond our expectations; introducing a depth of meaning that only can be gleaned after repetitive observation. The things that we produce, then, are merely co-produced: although we are inspired to bring them into being, the way they turn out is always a partly random event. One might argue we are talking about mere chance, or development, evolution even, without any creative effort. And indeed, these processes of change are not always acknowledged by scholars as counting as creative. Randomness is not always accepted, and may be misinterpreted as something intentional, discarded as irrelevant or neglected altogether. Still, we ought to look to artists like composer John Cage and painter Harold Cohen, who granted chance a place in the spotlight, by explicitly using random generators in order to produce their art. In Cage’s case the generator was no less than the I Ching. The book was used in much the same way as with divining, cancelling out Cage’s own will and intention as an artist in the creative act, since the book generated the outcomes that were implemented as building blocks for Cage’s aleatoric music.

The explicit invitation of randomness is not unlike the ritually fostered receptivity towards chance events. I would suggest that studying creative processes, looking at serendipity may be very worthwhile. To put it simple, serendipity can be shown to relate to creativity and non-intentionality as an occurrence of something meaningful to a creative process for which one was not necessarily looking, but which can be appreciated as beneficial to that creative process. An archetypal dream of a snake biting its own tail – Ouroboros – for instance was helpful for the discovery of Benzene rings, even if one could argue that there was a chance association between the two. In addition, sometimes people have random generators of their own – like a scientist mentioned in Gilhooly (1996) who draws two random cards from a large bowl filled with such cards on which has written down random words of his trade. By doing so, he is hoping that a chance draw of two cards will result in a new idea. Creativity in the sense that Ingold and Hallam (2007) use it, is located in the effort after meaning – the active relating of the words on the cards to each other, and in turn to his daily business. The link with tools of divination – interesting given the subject of my study, is evident.
Both the introduction of randomness and receptivity to meaningful coincidences are examples of what I would like to call acts of deliberate non-intentionality. I believe that deliberate non-intentionality has an important creative function in contemporary Pagan ritual. For I hope to have shown that Pagan ritual, which I only very generally discussed, is filled with efforts that seek to embrace chance events. The possibility to change the religious system itself is invited in as it were: blank spots in the ritual storyboard, open discussion about doing and participation, divinatory acts, and not in the least negotiating the meanings attached to outcomes of receptive creativity. So, I would like to make the conjecture that the introduction of chance as a potential for development, is an important function of ritual. Doing religion is a way to see if it still works. Ritual may be just that: the tuning in, turning on and adjusting the inner and outer worlds. And this seems to be happening exactly in all the rituals where the cosmological order embedded in the wheel of the year, is coupled to the personal myths and beliefs of the participants. In the end we can imagine a spiral dance that marries the inner and the outer, continuity and change, universals and particulars, even psychology and religious studies. I hope I am contributing to that link.

Literature


