

## Narrative Therapy of the Sporting Body

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### Introduction

The long-lasting research on sports injuries ranges, besides the medical aspects, on the psychology and the sociology of the problem. From the chronology of the mood change (Petrie, 1993: 256; Crossman, 1997: 335), and the social support structures (Curry, 1997: 280) to the highly technological recovery methods (Kutcher et al., 2013: 230), this literature focuses the therapy – all types of it – as a matter external to the concussion person. The non medical (i.e. psycho/sociological) studies underline though the impact of diverse elements on the individual reaction to sports trauma eliciting the new center of the problem: the harmed self. Context, culture, intra and inter personal relations convey in the construction of a self-treatment whose main expression is the auto-diegesis (Sparkers & Silvennoinen, 2013). The biomedicine, on the one side, diminishes the person to an organism, namely, a living mechanism to study and adjust when disease or injury compromised. Differently, born in 1990s, substrate of the just as young Medical Humanities, the narrative medicine is concerned with the person's living experience of the illness. Important is the semantic significance of Kleinman's lexical distinction (Kleinman, 1988) between the traditional concept of disease, namely an organic wound or dysfunction, described by the organic parameters of a physical and chemical nature and treated medically *stricto sensu*, and the term "illness", that is the individual experience of feeling bad. To this contributes patient's personal idea of illness and pain, an experience that is always culturally formed and is the main treating instrument of narrative-based medicine. The person's capacity to re-tell the life narrative warped by the injury, making in this way sense of it, is what actually is all about. Although the ailing patient experience an existential distrust in the validity of her future self, previously envisioned in one's own autoethnography, this unclear future being has always a physical body.

The importance of the last varies from one case to another, according to the level of the physical self-sufficiency. The life story of a future self envisioned as a writer differs radically in the embodied performance concern from the one where the future is envisioned based on the body's professional sports performance. The second perspective - where the body is dominant for one's future - shows, from 5 to 10 years after the injury (Loberg, 2008), significantly lower self-esteem and self-satisfaction which determines the specific type of life autoethnography where the injury constitutes a disruption - permanent or temporal - of the life narrative. The symptoms of this story interruption concern three different life extensions of the body, namely its relation with time, space and the self. Surprisingly, in the first perspective - where determinant for the coming existence is the mind - the body stands as important as the self. On one hand, the first contemporary fictional literature from the beginning of the last century is often generated from *mens insana in corpore insano*, evidenced by many American writers who weakened their bodies up to the point where this threatened their very ability to write novels: Fitzgerald wrote his masterpiece at the age of 23 to fall then in an early decline, Salinger committed suicide, Carver died not even having turned 50, overwhelmed by alcohol, Chandler starts writing very late, having lost all his assets during the Great Depression and also consuming large amounts of alcohol. On the other hand, the novels of the last decades reverse the previous situation by opting for a kind of biological writing. That is to say that the most virtuous spirit of the professional storyteller requires a healthy body in the same way as the dominant body of professional sportsman needs a healthy self, because when the first becomes weak, the second takes over one's life.

### **1. Sports in narratives. Narrative characteristics of the future dominating self**

The one who truly experienced on his body the relationship between sporting and fictional writing is the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. He is a passionate reader of the twentieth century American literature, often produced by authors with obvious physical deficits such as the favorite Fitzgerald, an alcoholic who alternates drastically in his stories illusion and pain. This contrasting experience inspired Murakami's memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (Teruhiko, 2013). Unexpectedly, this autoethnography of the non professional distance runner - Murakami has experience with this sport - is not a metaphor of the author's writing style always on the run between a setting and another, between a character and another, between reality and unreality, but a real essay on the marathon: where, when and how to run, how to train, which shoes to use. The

image of the writer with a glass of whiskey in his hand (an abused icon, from Verlaine to Hemingway and Houellebecq) is displaced by a new combination of aesthetics and dietetics explicit in the language of monumental normality that would obligatorily be adopted by every sportsman in the professional sports world.

The art of running provides valuable insights to understand the fictional narratives from the point of view of the body, the one of the writer, seen as a minority part in the classical novels' field. Conversely, convinced that only the intact and healthy body allows to counteracts the toxic element that is part of the emotional core of the human being, Murakami theorizes a kind of biological writing, which acts as an immune system against the toxicity of the novelist's imagination and takes shape in the relation between body and self. In other words the leading spirit of the professional storyteller depends on a healthy body, just as the dominant body of professional sportsman serves a strong spirit, with the caveat that when the first becomes incapable, the second takes over the reins of the life.

The experience of *mens insana in corpore insano* formula of the so beloved by the Japanese author American writers leads Murakami to the alignment with the combination *mens insana in corpore sano*, as evidenced by the stylistic tic - resumed by Chandler - of hypotyposis, manifested in the habit to treat the body surfaces in the literary space with a hyperbolic and excessive approach (Murakami, 2008). That's why the body, in its multiple, conflicting relations with the mind is the great protagonist of the Murakami's novels. For example, when this professional writer becomes a non professional runner, the body seems to become empty and light as the mind loses, during the race, every space - time dimension and the thoughts become derivatives of physic rather than mental action. In this precise moment the undetermined body pervades the leading self. Indeed, according to Murakami, the genesis of a novel text starts from a careful examination of the non-dominant corps that reveals its physical imperfections - the highly toxic elements - an "unexploited mine", whose output easily coincides with someone else's self (Berns, Blame, Prietula and Pye, 2013: 595). In this concurrence stays the embodied narrative of the *mens insane*.

The importance of the narratives of the healthy body in the injured self is striking starting from the postulate that the mind is the individual and the body is the collectivity. The *hikikomori*, the *NEET* or the *freeters* Japanese social phenomena, always connected with some grade of negation, intentional isolation, immobilization and long periods of self-enclosure from the outside world, which leads to physical stasis is the example of the conviction that the body is actually what

elicits and absorbs all social objective and subjective agencies and inter-personal conflicts. From the inequality between the normal existence – now in the past - and these new extreme states imposed by a introvert and inhibited self in a static body - *mens insana in corpore insano* - rises the need for biological writing, such as that of Murakami, for the reach of the trauma acceptance in different grades such as are the personalities.

## **2. Narratives in sports. Narrative characteristics of the injured dominating body**

The identity acquisition, memory flow and social body experience in a dynamic space-time dimension obey to the nature of the narrative activity that simultaneously shapes and is generated from living (Freeman, 2015). Thus the autoethnography related to trauma raises as a natural medicine method to unlock the potential personal conditions that determine the rebalancing of the altered self and body.

The self-tale is a social implant and, even if it is a spontaneous and unrepeatable creation to the teller, his native culture supplies a great archive of stories essential for the coherent social existence. Linking the memory's time dimension to the material body's spatial one, the narrative evidences the subjectivity's embodiment and leads to a reaction on the discrepancy between past and present states of the self. Importantly, moments of change (e.g. adolescence) or extreme conditions (e.g. illness of disabling injury) unlock one's awareness of the body, previously missing during normal physical functioning. All the more for the athletes, whose identity is determined by self-stability in a disciplined and highly controlled body considered predictable and unailing. From the disparity between this normal existence, which suddenly becomes the past, and the new extreme state imposed by a cumbersome and dysfunctional state of being, merge several types of narration which indicate the different grades of the trauma acceptance. The review of the last ten years' sources on the matter lead to the crystallizing of several main points in the personal storytelling of the sports-induced harm. From temporary disuse of the runner's knee (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Ronkainen, Harrison and Ryba, 2014: 190) to complete immobility due to spinal trauma of a rugby player (Sparkers & Smith, 2005: 85; Gilbourne, 2005: 82) , all narratives gravitate around tree main cores: the (dis)embodiment, i.e. self-body (mis)match (Cox, Griffin and Hartel, 2017: 392), the affordance, i.e. the space agency, and the chrono-geometry, i.e. the time flow (Smith, 2009: 350). Each of these is a pillar of the autoethnography that is an indicator of self-development.

The self-body match is so important because the narrator's physical and mental features merge most prominently and explicitly in the autobiographical expression as a medium of the embodiment process. Drawing attention to the visibly suffering body, the autographical narrative avatar presents the incarnation as the locus of identity. In the foreground is the corporeity - no more infallible and automatic - showing new convergence of public and private. The rupture between the two domains - the private inner self and its public overt body - leads to an embodiment crisis that the self-narration solves in contrasting ways. The highly performing sporting body generally is dominant on the selfhood which nevertheless imposes its discipline rebalancing the embodied mechanism. When the body-based social affirm is switched off by the injury, the embodiment trauma pulls out the real self. There is a physics and psychics rematch if the weakened but disciplined body meets the self-control expressed in a force based narrative of the restored embodiment. Contrarily the shattered self quits with uninhabited body, giving an unclear and confused fragments of story. Finally, self-conscious personality acquires a new emerging self in a resurrection narrative tale mediated by outgoing body.

Concurrently, the same nature of the self-tale is poly-temporal (poly-chronicity), that is bound by the past-present-future layers. The extreme (i.e. disability) interferes with everyday life, as the latter begins to be made up of multiple temporalities among which those related to the disability (time of therapy, of pain, of external assistance, etc.) creating a tension between extreme and normal constituted by the timeless layer of the waiting. So if the Raising narrative regains the linear chronological flow - remembering positively the past, accepting the present and looking for the future - the Fall one collapses in a complete stasis - seeing no past and future but vegetate in the present - while the Return narrative traces a time circularity - the glorious past recovery, i.e. the future, is what make sense to live the present.

Agency is not an individual estate but is enacted in meeting with material objects and settings. As stated by the agential realism (Barad, 2003: 825) the cause of the agency is the interaction between/across material objects, locations and the human, and is not constitutional to the self but is an emergent condition of the body. Though the agency performance is an alignment with and the setting of a specific object or context. In the injury storytelling, this interaction of human - object and human-human starts to change with the onset of trauma and, consequently, leads to the modulation of agency as well. This agency transformation of object and subject relations is not about the human's alignment with the impossible topics or bonds but for everyday

things and settings - like home or office – as well as relationships of acquaintance and friendship, that seem to acquire an extreme dimension. Consequently, the injury disruption of the agency – the interaction with the context (human-object) and with the others (human-human) - develops in a reacquisition of the agency when a self narrative leads to a restoration of the life esteem, or in an erosion of the agency when from the self-tale emerges an existential loss and, finally, in re-adaptation of the agency when the narrative helps to re-evaluate one's own life. Interestingly, the autoethnographies of the injured sportsman often reveal a hybrid subjectivity and objectivity agencies (Laurendeau, 2014: 13) where previous, actual and future agential features merge in a new blend relation with the reality.

### **3. Central Narrative lines**

The relation between body and mind reaches its optimum when the match between physical and mental can be described by equality, which in reality never occurs. There is always a predominant part in the normal prospected life narrative, and its damage leads to an extreme condition.

### **4. The Return - restoration tales**

The storyline of this narrative is one: the battle is lost, but not the war. The problem – a corporeal disability due to a sports accident – is present and has to be faced. This is the narrative voice of the weaker part – the mind – which becomes dominant. This change of the roles urges a new combative character, stimulated by the obstacle and revealed by a struggle metaphors and return action verbs. The extreme condition is considered as one of the life barriers to overcome in order to return to the normal condition. The time and narrative flow consequently is circular, starting and finishing with the past, which represents the desirable future defeating the temporary present. The narratives are thus dominated by the past tense, which is the only tense possible to consider and express an existence of the normally dominant part – the banished in the presence body because of being injured – and all the agencies of which is a constituent part. The autoethnography becomes the dynamic projection of a current battle to recapture the framing golden past i.e. future. The restoration tales efficiency is in the emergence and definition of an embodied self and, therefore, of a balance between body and mind otherwise frequently dwarfed by the dominant body in the athletic personality.

## **5. The Fall - disruption tales**

Disconnected and tumultuous phrases like wandering in the dark construct the decline narrative. The ungrammatical and fragmented language - metaphorically illustrated by the blind wandering – reveals an equally disarticulated personality. The break between body and mind is ultimate. The narration is crossed by a poly-temporality: the static and empty self time line on one hand and the unattainable and overpowering chronological flow of reality on the other hand. The tense of this life story is present, namely tenseless as the mnemonic paralysis cancels any present, past or future and establishes a dimensionless wait for the foregone conclusion. Any proposition from the weak minor part – the fragmented and shattered self – leads the previously dominant and currently uninhabited body to abandon any intra-action between/across material and human world, and to immerse the autoethnography in non-sense. Maintaining the link, even precarious, between body - mind and personality - reality is what defines the disruption tales utility and confirms the storytelling potential to objectify the things narrating them.

## **6. The Raising - journey tales**

What about living all in the future? This perspective stimulates embarking on a journey to an indefinite future which is the plot of the raising narrative. The positivity of the restoration tales, sustained by a surprisingly resistant self in act to return to the past, is here reasoned instead in a forward action shaping a new unexpected emerging self in relation to a renewed and differently extroverted body. Here, as well as in the return stories, the narration is dynamic but based on an accelerated temporality which follows the linear chronology past – present – future through the main future time tense. Expressions like progression, opportunity, reborn, self-exploration constitute the metaphorical image of the life story starting from the disrupting event - the disabling sports accident – prefigured in the enterprise to the foresaid equality of the re-embodied rounded personality. The last one activates novel hybrid agencies with the others – frequently guides in the quest or co-tellers empowering the social potentials – and with context – the beauty of the simple things that emerge from enjoying every single life moment. In this case the self time is faster than the chronological one as underlined by a future narrating related to the present eliminating any wait. The journey tales exemplify the extreme and emphasized ability of the storytelling to fading of the boundary between a told and a lived reality.

## 7. Conclusion

The sophisticated entanglement of the narrative assets issued from this analysis reveal the hybrid nature of this specific narration. The idiosyncratic resources of the autoethnography reveals not only the twin role of the self who, narrating, remembers and constructs the life tale, but mostly the interanimation (Stone, 2009: 69) of the personal and subjective position in the relation between the narrated past and future and narrating present IT. The last one edits the tale representation formed, informed and sustained by the previous and prospected historical subjectivity which in turn is the material of the same representation. This interanimation of the facet self reflects what is defined the personal narrative style of the taller revealed, for example, by specific metaphors and verb use in the telling. These endogenous sources are verified on the other hand of the exogenous social and cultural factors epitomized by the body. The narration becomes an embodiment process accomplishing the interaction momentum between subject and object determined by the agential realism. Biological entities' materiality, that are flashy bodies, conceived as a social constructs and vessels of the life experience is what actually underlines, when injured, the very primacy of the narration. The importance of this productive practice burst in turning point moments, hereby defined as extreme, such as becoming physically or mentally disabled through sports. The ability to reconstruct one's life narrating the former, present and future experience becomes the main sports activity for the former professional athletes. The ways in which this sport is practiced are nothing but narrative types herein drawn. Interpreting its own text, sportsmen are given the possibility to rewrite the injured body in a sanitizing autoethnography that recovers not only the storyteller self but the same space and time perception of the life flow. Therefore, the narratives are medical, serving as a vehicle for conveying the human experience to both the narrator and narrated.

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