

# Body Psychotherapy in Italy

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## he Birth

Interest in body psychotherapy in Italy dates back to the 1960s, following the publication of the first translations of Wilhelm Reich's books.

An initial group of scholars met in Rome to study Reichian themes, and in 1968 the Centro Studi Wilhelm Reich was founded in Naples. Its structure promoted therapeutic intervention but also study and research activities, with a focus on prevention in the social sphere. Initially, the Center did not have an easy life, especially in its relations with official scientific and clinical practice that had always dismissed (if not also removed) Reich and his theories. While using his important insights and concepts, it always gave a restrictive interpretation of his work. Even today, Reich's *Sexuality in the Cultural Revolution* is translated as *The Sexual Revolution*.

In 1973, interest in Reichian themes took off, thanks in part to the Center's publication of the journal *Quaderni Reichiani*, which bore witness to the ferment of ideas and initiatives in the late 70s. For the first time, Reich's students and successors were invited to the Center in Italy, and from there all subsequent initiatives in this country thrived. Other related centers sprang up in Padua, Treviso, Genoa and Rome, and body psychotherapy developed and established itself as multiple clinical approaches flourished. Beyond their inevitable differences, they were always united by the certainty that giving space to the body in therapy did not mean using a bodily technique to be added to the verbal ones. It focused theoretically and practically on a new and more complex paradigm, which included aspects of the relationship between the therapist and client, as well as consideration of the personalities at work, which had been overlooked by other psychotherapeutic approaches.

The framework of Italian body psychotherapy is made lively and complex by the interweaving and affirmation of various theories and schools of thought, such as Vegetotherapy, Bioenergetic Analysis, Functional Psychotherapy, Organismic Therapy, Organomics, Biosystemic Psychotherapy, and Bio-Psychoanalysis. No less important are the contributions of psychosomatic medicine, sexology and psychomotricity. These rich and dynamic offshoots are marked by the effort to understand, explain, and frame in an articulated theoretical system the many phenomena observable in the clinical setting that are not adequately integrated in exclusively verbal psychotherapy.

At the end of the 1980s, this movement became more vibrant and significant. In an attempt to establish reconnection between the various referenced theories and clinical practices, an important symposium, "Reich, History of a Removal," was held in Naples in 1987. It led to a series of important international and European conferences. Based on the results and conclusions of these meetings, and in conjunction with major international movements in the same field – the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (EABP) and Comité Scientifique Internationale de Thérapie Psychocorporelle (CSITP) – the first

National Conference of Body Psychotherapy took place in Naples in 1990. The goal was to define and officially establish in Italy a theoretical space not yet fully recognized by the official scientific and cultural world. It was so rich in content and perspectives that it made a fundamental contribution to research on human health and psychophysical well-being.

## **The National Association**

In the context of this first conference, the National Committee for Body Psychotherapy was founded under the direction of Luciano Rispoli, gathering all the scholars in the field. Two years later, at the second National Conference in Catania, the Committee was transformed into the National Association for Body Psychotherapy.

In the years that followed, the activities of the Association continued with a series of meetings and debates. Yet it still lacked a true national aim. Moreover, at that time Italy was focused on new ordinances for regulating psychotherapeutic activity, as well as accreditation of its training schools. The contacts, entrusted mostly to individual representatives, along with the organizations that directly formulate the new law, remain active today. It is always individual representatives who are active in the international and European associations, particularly the EABP, and who also hold leadership positions. The international and European conferences became venues for exchange and confrontation, and have given new impetus to the Association. In 1999, all the Italian institutes and societies focused on psycho-corporeal work came together. The individual psychotherapists who had followed the evolution of the Association during its ten-year lifespan rewrote the statutes and officially established the Italian Association of Body Psychotherapy (AIPC) in 2000.

With its diverse representation, the AIPC constitutes the Italian section of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy. Its link with the EABP is defined in its statutes, and expressed by full adherence to the objectives, code of ethics, and standards of admission for members of the EABP. In fact, being an AIPC member confers the status of corresponding member (for the individual or the institution) of the EABP. As a body, the AIPC adheres to the Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Associations (FIAP), which is the Italian section of the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP). All recognized psychotherapy training schools in Italy are members of the National Coordination of Schools of Psychotherapy (CNSP).

## **Body and culture**

With regard to the position of body psychotherapy in the panorama of Italian culture, we can say that we are faced with a certain duplicity. On the one hand, we have a consonance with the Italian way of using the body emphatically for linguistic expression and communication in general. This makes the use of the body in psychotherapy a fairly accessible tool, and those who come to therapy are not so surprised by this methodology. On the other hand, it must be said that the philosophical and cultural tradition of the last century is deeply rooted in the work of two thinkers, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, who influenced both culture in general and educational institutions in particular. They shaped the Italian spirit with the predominance of intellectual over personal or existential experience.

This double track comprises a large part of the Italian cultural construct. On the one hand, we find creativity and flexibility, typical characteristics of “getting by,” as a sort of emergency pragmatism. On the other hand, we encounter a large tendency to serve

tradition, as well a strong propensity for intellectual abstraction. These can be blocks to innovation and evolution. This dichotomy of conservation and transgression are rather typical traits of the Italian mindset. In the field of psychotherapy, this produces a paradox: it is not shocking for a therapist to suggest movements with the body or even exercises to the client, but this is often not considered a form of treatment that is actually “real psychotherapy.” In such a cultural landscape, the way that body psychotherapy landed in Italy turns out to be logical. It closely resembles the work of the mole, emerging suddenly, but after long underground digging.

In fact, after the first attempts at diffusion during the period of cultural and political protest in the 1960s, the movement seemed to die out. Or, perhaps we should say that it seemed to sink, only to re-emerge strongly between the 1980s and 1990s, until it built itself into a truly independent force in psychotherapy.

We can now say that body psychotherapy has managed to create its own autonomous space of reference and action in Italy. It is a relatively small space, but one that is now recognized by other models. It is no longer subject to misunderstanding or devaluation, as might have been the case some time ago.

As a consequence of what has been described so far, it must be said that this progressive integration of body psychotherapy into the larger psychotherapy community has also come at a certain price. Body psychotherapy has had to transform, adapt, and adjust to a certain style of work and thinking that modulates and reformulates all the strongly expressive, cathartic, or, as Baudelaire would say, “*expérience limite*” that predominantly characterized the practice during its first few decades. Metaphorically, we could say that a certain youthful extremism had to give way to mature moderation. I say this with a dual emotional involvement: there is an awareness of the need to adapt to changing conditions, and at the same time there is a longing for the intensity of continued experimentation.

Another important aspect that characterizes the position of corporeality in the thinking of Italians is the powerful presence of Catholic institutions in the country. The fact that Rome is the seat of the Vatican is not irrelevant, because this proximity to a “spiritual power” creates a strong impact on the conscience of its citizens. We could say that Italians may feel both watched but also protected by the Vatican. Thus, we can again observe a dual reaction to the use of the body. Catholicism (and Christianity as a whole) produces a two-faced vision of the body, with pleasure remaining on the dark and hidden side. This causes a split that favors a general attitude of dismissing corporeal and sexual pleasure, and producing an exaltation of the purifying and redeeming power of all pain experienced in life.

We can thus understand how complex it is for such individuals influenced by a particular strand of Catholicism to elaborate the relevance of the body in the psychotherapeutic setting, where deep, forbidden desires and guilt urges appear. It can be inferred from these considerations that the stereotypical “Italian hedonism” is often an attempt to avoid pain rather than an active pursuit of pleasure. It is more akin to fear of punishment than excitement about reward.

With these considerations, we can hope to explain the attitude of the rather ghastly curiosity with which orthodox psychoanalysts ask body psychotherapists if they really dare to touch the client’s body, and if it is really true that reactions such as trembling, shortness of breath, and even convulsions are stimulated by touch – which reminds them of the hysterical phenomena described by Freud. The perplexities of the psychotherapeutic scientific community are first and foremost ethical, and secondarily epistemologi-

cal. They sink their reason into the sociocultural unconscious rather than the dictates of scientific methodology. For this reason, paradoxically, it then becomes easier to make these opposing universes communicate, partly because the Catholic message is far more complex than the simplification of common thought.

In fact, I want to quote a well-known Psalm (39; Hebrews 10:4-10) that summarizes all the richness and the complexity of this theme: “Entering into the world, Christ says: ‘You wanted neither sacrifice nor offering, a body instead you prepared for me. You did not please either burnt offerings or sacrifices for sin. A body you offered me, to follow your will.’”

## **Dance movement therapy**

At this point, the history and evolution of body psychotherapy, understood as the development of Reichian and post-Reichian thought and practice, calls for a separate discussion of the history of yet another strand of body-mediated clinical work. I’m referring to dance movement therapy, which arrived in Italy in the early 1980s, thanks to two U.S.-trained therapists, Debra McCall and Rosa Maria Govoni.

The probing cultural research of these two dance therapists produced a gradual aggregation of all the experiences revolving around expressive dance, Psychomotricity, and Authentic Movement. It created a theoretical and clinical container that allowed them over time to constitute a pole of attraction for everyone who sought to bring together movement with sensory and emotional work.

It is strange, however, that body psychotherapy and dance movement therapy have traveled parallel yet distinct paths. Without significantly meeting, and separately building their own paths of cultural and scientific recognition, they remained in dialogue and built alliances from different clinical perspectives. While body psychotherapy has always drawn deep nourishment from the influence of humanistic psychology, dance movement therapy has looked almost exclusively to the territory occupied by psychoanalytic models. This is probably due to the formative history of the respective founders in Italy of the various schools of psychotherapy. It is perhaps also partly related to that cultural split involving corporeality, discussed above.

There is a note of peculiarity in all of this because we have very similar clinical practices, while using very different models.

Indeed, dance movement therapy, according to the model of Italian Art Therapy – an association founded in 1982 – makes particular reference to psychoanalytic theories that have deepened the observation and study of the affective processes that occur between the child and their environment during development. It also places emphasis on the symbolic value of bodily representations, and the developmental significance of the creative process. The dance therapist makes use of their own bodily and imaginative experience to get in touch with the developmental needs of the client. This therapy provides a favorable environment for the individual to discover and elaborate expressive modes and symbolic forms representative of their experiences, thus promoting a creative, transformative, and maturing process.

It is within this theoretical framework that dance movement therapy developed its clinical practice, but above all, it builds the essential meaning of its model. It becomes a bridge between artistic practices of all kinds, and clinical models. It is an attempt to explain and interpret, in an innovative way, the role of creativity with the body of the individual.

## The current situation

Until the late 1980s, body psychotherapy and dance movement therapy continued to expand and spread in a somewhat random manner, without constant points of reference. But since the early 1990s, the fate of psychotherapy schools in Italy has been marked by an important event that changed the cultural and scientific landscape. A law regulating the professional practice of psychologists and psychotherapists was passed in 1989. The result of lengthy parliamentary debate, it finally defined the field of psychology in Italy, and created its boundaries. It did so by differentiating it from medical and psychiatric practice, and elevating it from a vast sea of empirical therapeutic practices based on cultural syncretism or randomness. The law ennobles clinical psychology, but at the same time characterizes it in a highly restrictive way. In fact, the law allows only physicians and psychologists access to the schools of psychotherapy, thus eliminating all those with degrees in the humanities and/or in social sciences. The approval of this law is a kind of drastic consequence for all schools of psychotherapy with various previous approaches, since it forces all institutes to apply for government recognition in order to have cultural visibility, and especially presence in the market.

In 1989, a ministerial commission, composed mostly of academics, was established to judge the scientific validity of the clinical model, and its organizational and didactic capacity. The criteria adopted by the commission was obviously related to academic practice and vision, and it is therefore a difficult and complex task for body psychotherapy schools to obtain legal acceptance from the commission. Here a watershed with the past was created: only those who are approved can hope to continue to survive, since only recognized schools of psychotherapy will be able to issue valid certificates for professional licensing.

It is clear that future students will tend to choose only those schools that can provide them with legally valid certificates, so all other schools will be doomed to a gradual loss of interest.

It must be said that in the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian scene consisted essentially of two groupings. On one side, the neo-Reichian schools that clearly drew on the Reichian tradition, and on the other, the so-called post-Reichian schools that were based on the thought and work of personalities who took their cue from Reich, but later elaborated and even profoundly transformed his thought, such as Alexander Lowen, Luciano Rispoli, David Boadella, Jerome Liss, Malcom Brown, and George Downing.

After the law was passed, the schools submitted their scientific model to the ministerial commission, but not all of them received recognition. At present there are four recognized body psychotherapy institutes that can issue diplomas recognized by the Ministry of Universities, and thus also by the Ministry of Health: Società Italiana Analisi Bioenergetica (SIAB), Società Italiana Analisi Reichiana (SIAR), Scuola Europea Psicoterapia Funzionale (SEF), and Società Italiana Biosistemica (SIB).

Similarly, dance movement therapy schools have also applied for recognition, but presently only one obtained it: the Institute of Expressive Psychotherapy, which draws on the work of Arthur Robbins.

I believe the current situation is good enough, although we are in danger of losing some worthy schools and traditions along the way. At the same time that we gained scientific credibility, organizational reliability, and media visibility, as with all historical change, we have, as Morin would say, both gained and lost. We witnessed an emergence as well as a constraint, an enrichment but also an impoverishment.





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