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Theoretical Foundations of Grotowski's *Total Act, Via Negativa, and Conjunctio Oppositorum*

The only communication that has true value is communication that is an enhancement to the other person.

-- Martin Buber

Grotowski's mentality is such that it attaches itself to creative ideas which he in turn uses as instruments of personal investigation. The logic implicit within them is then pushed to the extreme. It is not a question of influence but of a kind of transmission. The torch is taken up once again but not as a relic, to be extinguished with reverence or be placed under a globe, nor like a sacred flame to be piously preserved, rather a flame capable of lighting a new hearth.

-- Raymonde Temkine

The three theoretical concepts most central to Poor Theatre as this aesthetic was developed by Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre in the early 1960s are *conjunctio oppositorum*, *via negativa*, and *total act*. Although these are terms of art specific to Poor Theatre, they represent a reformulation of ideas which have been in circulation, in some cases, for centuries. Even as a young man, Grotowski had wide-ranging interests and a passion for philosophical thought. While he did occasionally write theory or philosophy, he was first and foremost a theatre artist seeking solutions to the real theatrical challenges he encountered. Many of the major questions Grotowski asked are the same ones asked by scores of people before him: What do truth and authenticity in acting and performance mean? What is the actor-spectator relationship? What constitutes the greatest manifestation of the actor's craft, and how might we work to achieve it? Why do we create theatre—what is its function within community? His answers to these questions defined his Poor Theatre. In this essay, I propose not only to enhance our understanding of Poor Theatre's key concepts but also to gesture towards their practical application in Polish Laboratory Theatre work. I will develop these concepts by drawing upon the theories of Patanjali and his *yoga sutras*, Nagarjuna and the Hindu concept of *sunyata*, Zeami and his treatises on the art of Japanese Noh drama, Denis Diderot, Martin Buber, Victor Turner, Niels Bohr, and Grotowski himself. However, before turning to that task, I will provide a brief [p. 176] overview of the theorists not selected for this study to demonstrate the potential scale of a comprehensive investigation.

Grotowski borrowed from often contradictory philosophical systems which, in addition to those already mentioned, included structuralism, psychoanalysis ("Not about psychology in relation to character but rather how, *involuntarily*, to draw out certain characteristics and personal energies in

order to colour the scenic action"(1)), and Marxism. During his university study at Moscow's GITIS, he set out to become the world's foremost expert on Konstantin Stanislavski so that he could begin his own practical theatre research at the place where Stanislavski had left off. He also became fascinated with the theories of Meyerhold after reading the complete mise-en-scene documentation for *The Inspector General*. But of the Russian directors, the one most influential for Grotowski was probably Evgeny Vakhtangov, whose work extended Stanislavski's theories of physical action. Grotowski studied with Yuri Zavadsky, a former actor with Vakhtangov and Stanislavski—and read Vakhtangov's essays. Because these directors and their theories are regularly invoked in studies about Grotowski, I will not take them up further at this time.

Antonin Artaud is often cited as having influenced Grotowski's theories, and although there are some similarities between their visions, it has already been established that Grotowski did not learn about Artaud or his writings until after the notions of *conjunctio oppositorum*, *via negativa*, and *total act* were already developed (see Temkine and Barba). Similarities to Artaud are coincidental and are more likely the influence of the Polish theoretician-playwright S.I. Witkiewicz's (Witkacy) influence on Grotowski. Witkiewicz had formulated theories comparable to Artaud's but had done so nearly two decades earlier.(2)

As early as 1963, Eugenio Barba, who spent 1961-64 in Opole as Grotowski's apprentice, was writing about the work there as an "anthropological expedition" into the "reservoir of hereditary experiences that science designates sometimes as 'primitive thought' (Lévi-Strauss), sometimes as 'archetypes' (Jung), 'collective representations' (Durkheim), 'categories of the imagination' (Mauss and Hubert), or even as 'elementary thoughts' (Bastian)."(3) I believe these [p. 177] theories would be most useful in connection with Grotowski's Objective Drama phase and even elements of the earlier paratheatrical projects.

The selection of theorists in this essay represents my interest in understanding the intercultural foundations of Poor Theatre. Grotowski was drawn to Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern philosophies at a very young age. His interest was fostered by family members, including his maternal grandparents and his mother, who was fascinated with Hinduism and took Grotowski to India. During Grotowski's college years, scholarships enabled him to travel widely, spending time in Paris as well as in Egypt and other areas of the Middle East. And after he had accepted the directorship of Teatr 13 Rzedow, he spent August 1962 in China. Barba says Grotowski returned from China with information and impressions about what he saw there that had direct bearings upon his work but indicates that Grotowski was more influenced by the Eastern philosophies which he studied in books than by direct encounters with theatrical traditions on his travels.(4)

This simplest way to think about Grotowski's notion of *conjunctio oppositorum* is as the necessity of bringing together opposite forces in order to create a unified whole. By 1967, in an article written to explain the aims of his institute, Grotowski articulated the theory of conjunction oppositorum in his list of "conditions essential to the art of acting" which would be made the object of a methodical investigation: "To stimulate a process of self-revelation, going back as far as the subconsciousness, yet canalizing this stimulus in order to obtain the required reaction."(5) On a basic level, this theory can be traced through Niels Bohr's Principle of Complementarity, which emerged from quantum physics and the knowledge that the electron is *both* particle and wave—which had previously been considered an impossible contradiction. The Principle of Complementarity "allows the possibility of accommodating widely divergent human experiences in an underlying harmony," and holds that "seemingly irreconcilable points of view need not be contradictory. These, on deeper understanding may be found to be mutually illuminating; the two apparently opposing views being partial views of a 'totality' seen from [p. 178] different planes."(6) Grotowski's brother worked as a physicist at the Bohr Institute. I believe the notion of mutual illumination and wholeness gained because of the opposing forces appealed to Grotowski's political sensibilities in a time when the arts were carefully censored by the government. This principle effectively can be seen as a bridge bringing Western science together with Eastern wisdom. In many ways, as Grotowski applies this concept to the actor's work, he rejects the notion of Denis Diderot's paradox as it has conventionally been understood.

Our common understanding of Diderot's paradox tends to be reduced to Lee Strasberg's famous paraphrase: "to move the audience the actor must himself remain unmoved."(7) Although Diderot did think about theatre and the actor's situation as mutually exclusive binary oppositions, when we revisit what Diderot actually said and why he said it, we can see how that reduction oversimplifies the argument. Diderot understood that two actors playing the same role would play it differently, "expressing entirely different thoughts and matter."(8) He saw the play's words as no more than symbols "which need action, gesture, intonation, expression, and whole context of circumstance, to give them their full significance"(9) and so believed we should not expect actors' performances to correspond precisely. However, he identified "unequal acting" as a fault of "players who play from the heart,"(10) relying upon natural inclinations as their only resource. In combining his notion that "Nature without Art [cannot] make a great actor when nothing happens on the stage exactly as it happens in nature"(11) with his observation that "The extravagant creature who loses his self-control has no hold on us; this is gained by the man who is self-controlled", (12) Diderot effectively called for discipline in the actor's craft. From an outsider's perspective, and with his ideas about theatre's possibilities bound by the type of [p. 179] theatre and acting prevalent in his day, Diderot constructed a binary whereby actors are either ruled by their sensibility or by their

thought/judgment. When Diderot says that great actors must have no sensibility,(13) he means more than simple emotion. For Diderot, "sensibility" describes a host of conditions ranging from a "disposition which accompanies organic weakness [to] vivacity of imagination [. . .] faintings [. . .] to loss of self-control [. . .] to having no clear notion of what is true, good, and fine, to being unjust, to going mad."(14) The unbridled emotion—even psychic break—to which Diderot refers spins into an indulgence on the part of the actor which he views as generally unpleasurable and incapable of moving the audience. However, the thoughtful, disciplined actor advocated by Diderot has passion "with a definite course," where "the accents are the same, the positions are the same, the movements are the same."(15) He suggests that even the more desirable of the sensibilities are completely absent in thinking actors and that all ability to prevent oneself from spiraling into madness is lost in actors with sensibility.

But ultimately, Diderot wants an actor who will "play [the part] so well that you think he is the person."(16) With this, he introduces another layer of the paradox: the problem of the actor being himself and simultaneously not himself—presenting a lie of self. Given a culture which privileges the text as Diderot's did and as our own still does, it is easy to see how this can be construed as deception. But we cannot presume that Diderot attempted to think about possible solutions outside the realm of the theatre he knew. He has attached the notion of deception to an actor whose task is assumed to be to faithfully represent a text. As we move to the avant-garde and Grotowski's work, we see Grotowski's productions with the Polish Laboratory Theatre as a way not so much around the paradox as straight through the heart of it, asking the same questions that had prompted Diderot's formulation of the paradox in the first place. It's actually important for Diderot, as Strasberg also asserts, that "Our response to the actor is a total one [that] does not distinguish easily between the actor as a personality and the role he is [p. 180] playing."(17) This notion of totality as it moves the audience appears to answer Diderot's own question about what true talent is.

As already discussed, such a totality is part of the goal described by the Principle of Complementarity, and the goal of Grotowski's practical research was to develop methods through which the actors could strive to achieve *total act*: the crux of an actor's art through which one reveals oneself completely to another (the spectator) in a self-reflexive act that does not distinguish between character and self. In *total act*, Grotowski articulates a dialogical encounter with the spectator in metaphysical terms, which can be difficult to trace out without it seeming as though the sole purpose has become religion. To the contrary, Grotowski firmly believed that spirituality and discourse of the sacred were not the sole property of religion. Even when he borrowed from theological philosophies, as he did with Martin Buber's dialectic theory, Grotowski's new application of the theory did not also borrow the religion. Buber was among Grotowski's favorite authors. The themes of authentic

encounter, sacrifice, and risk which run through Grotowski's discussion can also be found in Buber's concept of I-Thou, which says it is only when a human being is "concentrated into a unity" that he can " proceed to his encounter [with You]—wholly successful only now—with mystery and perfection."(18) But to arrive at this vision of an actor-spectator relationship as *total act*, Grotowski had to eradicate Diderot's mutually exclusive binaries. He cultivated the notion of *conjunctio oppositorum* and devised a methodical approach (*via negativa*) through which *total act* might be achieved.

Conjunctio oppositorum is also critical for dealing with the relationship between spontaneity and formal technique in Grotowski's theatre. His response to Margaret Croyden on this subject merits quoting at length:

Structure or form is a discipline; it is significant because it is a process of signs that stimulates the spectator's associations. This discipline is organized and structured; without it we have chaos and pure dilettantism; this is the first thing. The second thing: if you have structure which stimulates the audience, and if the actor does not express 'the *total act*,' if he does not reveal all of himself (I mean his instinctive and biological roots), action is prevalent, but it is not a living action. It is significant, but it is not alive. A great work is an expression of contradiction, of opposites. Discipline is obtained through spontaneity, but it always remains a discipline. Spontaneity is curbed by discipline, and yet there is always [p. 181] spontaneity. These two opposites curb and stimulate each other and give radiance to the action. Our work is neither abstract nor naturalistic. It is natural and structured, spontaneous and disciplined.(19)

This passage succinctly maps out the dialectic nature of the foundational concepts upon which almost all the theory of Grotowski's production phase was built. In it, he reveals the structuralist side of his method, showing himself to be consciously and deliberately taking it up as a responsibility for him and the actors to develop systems of signs for the "spectator's associations." His distinguishing of the spectators' associations from actors' associations is important because for Grotowski the two were not *necessarily* the same. In addition to the structure of signs through which the actor works, Grotowski says the action must be a "living action." He situated the "living action" as an element of any "great work," which can mean one in which the actor is expressing *total act*. *Total act* can be thought of in this way as a vehicle for the actor's expression. But what, then, is the "great work" an expression of? Of contradiction and opposites—incorporating not only the content, the meaning of the signs communicated, but also what we might call the methodology employed by the director and actors in order to communicate those signs.

Victor Turner, in *The Anthropology of Performance*, asked much the same question about social drama as Croyden asked Grotowski above: "How to account for the fact that the social drama is processually 'structured' before any story about it has been told."(20) With *conjunctio oppositorum*, you don't view that as a liability but as an opportunity to transcend ordinary significance. One *must* not exclude the other.

How does this theory get developed? As already indicated, Grotowski had a strong interest in Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern philosophies from the time of his youth. We also know that Grotowski spent August 1962 in China. Eugenio Barba, who was apprenticed to Grotowski at the time, says he returned with information and impressions about what he saw there that had direct bearings on the work:

[Grotowski] had noticed that in the Peking Opera the actors begin an action by starting out in the opposite direction to where they want to end up. If they want to move to the left, they take a step towards the right and then go to their objective [p. 182] on the left. This observation became an effective working tool that we baptized 'the Chinese principle', and under the same name it also entered into the terminology and practice of Odin Teatret.(21)

If we can look past Barba's colonialist narrative, we can see this marking a moment to which the principle of opposition became a conscious factor in the Grotowski's work. Historically, this is still more than a year earlier than the theory of *total act* would be fully developed and just at the beginning of the rehearsal process of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, when physical, vocal, and rhythmic training would become a continuing, daily activity and the theory of *via negativa* would become clarified.

Grotowski developed techniques permitting actors, in collaboration with directors, to structure roles through a sign system within which they could explore personal associations. These personal associations are another essential vehicle by which the actor can engage in the act of self revelation towards absolute presence, oneness with the self, and an open, authentic encounter with the spectator. Grotowski's *conjunctio oppositorum* brings together apparent opposites in a dynamic relationship that, he believes, are necessary for any work to transcend the ordinary in a living, dynamic way.

Notions of transcendence are critical to Grotowski's concepts of *via negativa* and *total act*; however, tracing out the theoretical foundations of *via negativa* and *total act* as separate concepts is a sticky task for two reasons. First, the two terms are implicitly bound together—*via negativa* being the discipline or praxis through which an actor works to achieve *total act*. Second, the collision of theories feeding in to Grotowski's theatrical vision does not readily lend itself to linear description. It is in this dense intersection that we can note clear strains of Patanjali's yoga *sutras*, Nagarjuna's doctrine of *sunyata*, and Martin Buber's I-Thou.

In his *yoga sutras*, the ancient Indian philosopher Patanjali offers the possibility of spiritual transformation not through mystical experience but through logical meditation practices and philosophical introspection. When Patanjali writes, "The purpose of Yoga discipline is to eliminate the

impurities caused by the process of conditioning so that the Light of Pure Unconditioned Awareness may shine"(22) this awareness is a oneness with your true nature, [p. 183] referred to in the *yoga sutras* as the Atman. Into this *sutra*, we could simply insert *via negativa* and conjunction oppositorum to arrive at a basic philosophy for actor training that essentially says the actor's main task on the way to *total act* involves not accruing skills so much as eradicating obstacles.

Until the theory of *via negativa* was developed, Grotowski's actors had practiced conventional training methods which usually sought solutions to some kind of "how-to" question related to a specific production need: "How does one show irritation? How should one walk? How should Shakespeare be played?"(23) We might call this a *via positiva* approach to actor training, with actors amassing skills from singing, dancing, and fencing to horseback riding. While this approach does build an arsenal of useful skills, they function much like vocabulary in language: You either have the word/skill or you don't. It doesn't have any bearing on expression. But Grotowski's aim was to understand and work at the theatrical event reduced to its most necessary elements—the actor and spectator. What happens in this relationship? How does communication occur? And how might this relationship be optimized? The simple fact of possessing skills did not optimize the actor-spectator relationship so crucial to the then-developing aesthetic of *poor theatre*. Methods had to be explored for liberating the actor's expressiveness within elaborated sign structures.

By 1967, Grotowski had formulated his answers. In an article explaining the aim of his institute, he stated three "conditions essential to the art of acting" as comprising the object of methodical investigation, including "to eliminate from the creative process the resistances and obstacles caused by one's own organism, both physical and psychic (the two forming a whole)."(24) This process of elimination, while very clearly focused on facilitating creative process, depends upon a union of the mind and the body. Such mastery is not merely one of building muscles, though, it is intricately bound in with notions of wholeness not only of self but of community. The other two essential conditions reinforce the metaphysics underlying that quoted above, showing a dual process involved in working towards *total act* that is discussed elsewhere in this essay.

[p. 184] Grotowski's statements of essential conditions read like the *yoga sutras* and, in fact, among the *sutras* of Patanjali, we can find a similar concept: "With the removal of obstacles there comes a mastery of cognition and action which ranges from the smallest to the biggest,"(25) and "Thus we may cultivate the power of concentration and remove the obstacles to enlightenment which cause all our sufferings."(26) According to Hindu thought, the word "obstacle" suggests a particular emphasis: Obstacles present a consequence of "alienation from the Reality within us."(27) Among the obstacles described by Patanjali are those psychological blocks which also form a central

target of Grotowski's *via negativa*: "ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and the desire to cling to life."(28) To work through *via negativa*, Grotowski said,

[. . .] one must ask the actor: "What are the obstacles blocking you on your way towards the *total act* which must engage all your psycho-physical resources, from the most instinctive to the most rational?" We must find out what it is that hinders him in the way of respiration, movement and—most important of all—human contact. What resistances are there? How can they be eliminated?(29)

He identified key obstacles getting in actors' way and preventing their progress towards *total act*: breathing capacity and control, physical flexibility, and even an insensitivity to—or perhaps lack of understanding about—the interpersonal relationship actors must have with other actors as well as spectators.

Grotowski began to guide his actors to work at the level of impulse, striving for ways to free them from what he saw as a gap in time between inner impulse and outer reaction. Even the slightest hesitation to follow through on an impulse renders it less potent, less direct in some capacity, and, conversely, opens up the temptation for the actor to "edit" the moment of expression or inject some cliché gesture. He developed methods of training that could help actors confront their personal blocks and could remain flexible enough for actors to continue using them even as their personal obstacles changed, shifted, or returned. Many of these [p. 185] exercises were described by Barba in his 1966 article, "Actor's Training," which appears in *Towards a Poor Theatre*. All of these exercises, many borrowed from hatha yoga, aim to develop organicity—a union of body and mind, impulse and action—not to build muscles or gymnastic virtuosity. Like Patanjali's meditation, actor training at the Polish Laboratory Theatre was a "process of devolution," an evolution in reverse through which the performer simultaneously "goes inward, seeking always the cause behind the appearance, and then the cause behind the cause, until the innermost Reality is reached,"(30) and goes outward, seeking to manifest that innermost reality physically and vocally at the moment and level of impulse.

The theory of *via negativa* helps us understand that for Grotowski, in the theatrical event, expression is a property adhering to impulses as they are made visible; the privileged level of communication with the spectators resides in the impulse, not in the physical gesture or the spoken word. A training which helps actors achieve simultaneity of impulse and action would help the actor's body cease to be an obstacle to direct communication with the audience. Using imagery reminiscent of Artaud's, Grotowski wrote that by bringing impulse and action together, the actor's body would burn and vanish, no longer preventing the actor from following through on an impulse even for a second due to physical inability or fear.(31) This is an element of *total act*.

Nagarjuna's doctrine of *sunyata* follows almost the precise trajectory as that outlined above. Barba has discussed how the concept of *sunyata* fit into Grotowski's theories at the time:

Sunyata, the Void, is not nothingness. It is non-duality in which the object does not differ from the subject. The self and belief in the self are the causes of error and pain. The way to escape from error and pain is to eliminate the self. This is the Perfect Wisdom, the enlightenment that can be attained through a *via negativa*, denying worldly categories and phenomenons to the point of denying the self and, by so doing, reaching the Void.(32)

In order for a company of actors to follow this *via negativa* toward *total act*, they must change their training regimen from a unified group activity to an individualized endeavor, with the principle of elimination guiding the choice and development of exercises. Training, [p. 186] therefore, becomes an individual journey of self-knowledge toward self-revelation not as a fixed value but as direction. Borrowing again from Patanjali's *yoga sutras*, the actor must cultivate an attitude of non-attachment if he is to view the obstacles he must renounce as "mere restlessness in the mind"(33) rather than as something he really needs or wants. By eliminating our obstacles, says Patanjali, we are "freeing ourselves from imaginary needs and desires."(34) Grotowski says that the point

is not to renounce part of our nature—all should retain its natural place: the body, the heart, the head, something that is 'under our feet' and something that is 'over the head.' All like a vertical line, and this verticality should be held taut between organicity and the *awareness*. *Awareness* means the consciousness which is not linked to language (the machine for thinking), but to Presence.(35)

Just as the desire not to fall may prevent us from learning to walk on our hands, the desire to protect our own egos may prevent us from fully knowing ourselves and from having an authentic encounter with another person. Like the Hindus, and like Martin Buber's dialectic philosophy, Grotowski saw the sacred in each person's true nature, in the total acceptance of human beings and of the present.

Following Patanjali's concept of non-attachment, Grotowski posits the "decisive factor in this process" as "humility, a spiritual predisposition: not to **do** something, but to **refrain** from doing something, otherwise the excess becomes impudence instead of sacrifice."(36) Two lines of thought must be clear in order to follow this statement: the notion of sacrifice and the notion of passivity. First, the actor who achieves self-revelation through *via negativa* sacrifices not himself but his obstacles—those things we often hold tightly to as needs but which merely belie that "restlessness of the mind" already discussed. For Grotowski, this means that "the actor must act in a state of trance," defined not a loss of consciousness or will or presence but, rather, "the ability to concentrate in a particular theatrical way."(37)

[p. 187] More than 600 years ago, the Japanese theatre practitioner and philosopher Zeami wrote his treatises on the art of Noh drama in which he, too, discusses the actor's art in terms of sacrifice, and the same notion of concentration appears again:

The actor must rise to a selfless level of art, imbued with a concentration that transcends his own consciousness, so that he can bind together the moments before and after that instant when "nothing happens." Such a process constitutes that inner force that can be termed "connecting all the arts through one intensity of mind."(38)

This passage offers a logical link to the second line of thought noted above—that of passivity. Zeami's "one intensity of mind" equates to the requisite state of readiness which Grotowski describes as "a state in which one does not '**want to do that**' but rather '**resigns from not doing it.**'"(39) This is a deep, disciplined readiness on the level of impulse; it is not a release. Zeami considers this the Noh actor's greatest and most secret skill: "the actor must never abandon his concentration but must keep his consciousness of that inner tension. It is this sense of inner concentration that manifests itself to the audience,"(40) and it is this inner concentration, impulse made visible, which allows for the possibility of *total act*.

While there is no possibility of claiming that this essay has explored all the ways which Grotowski's terms of Poor Theatre intersect with the theorists I've addressed, I believe I have demonstrated the wealth of opportunity for extended study. Even without the benefit of that study, I hope to have offered a new perspective through which to understand the passage from *Towards a Poor Theatre* that I believe stands among Grotowski's most eloquent and concise encapsulations of *conjunctio oppositorum*, *via negativa*, and *total act*:

Why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? Not in order to teach others but to learn with them what our existence, our organism, our personal and unrepeatable experience have to give us; to learn to break down the barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the breaks which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others; to destroy the limitations caused by our ignorance and lack of courage; in short, to fill the emptiness in use: to fulfil [sic] ourselves. Art is neither a state of the soul (in the sense of some extraordinary, unpredictable moment of inspiration) nor a state of [p. 188] man (in the sense of a profession or social function). Art is a ripening, an evolution, an uplifting which enables us to emerge from darkness into a blaze of light.(41)

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Endnotes

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