

Literature as a Vehicle of Mystery: On Jerzy Grotowski's Writing

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Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), who is considered to be one of the greatest theater artists of the 20th century, frequently expressed his ambivalent relation to words, repeating that any true knowledge has to be obtained by practice. However, all his life he created and published texts. The volume collecting them all in print runs to 1131 pages. Scholars interpreting his art (e.g. Krzysztof Rutkowski, Zbigniew Osiński) and his close collaborators, like Ludwik Flaszen, frequently times underlined the importance of Grotowski's writings, stressing a special function literature played in this artist's research. Following their recognitions, partly polemizing with them, one can formulate some basic assumptions concerning the character and functions of Grotowski's writing and its relation to the main aspects of contemporary literature. This was the man of theater appears to be also an aware creator of a literature paradoxically closely related and working for mystery beyond words.

KEYWORDS: Jerzy Grotowski, Polish theatre of 20th century, Polish literature of 20th century

Jerzy Grotowski is known as one of the most prominent theater artists of the 20th century, both in Poland and abroad. He directed seminal, groundbreaking shows, created and practiced an original process of working with actors, which allowed them to reach incredible levels of self-exploration and expression. In the early 1970s, he shocked the theater world by declaring that he would end his theater career and pursue interests whose scope and aims went beyond aesthetics and culture, which ultimately led him to create the so-called 'Art as Vehicle.' Created in separation from the world, it no longer inspired mass excitement, but it still interested and fascinated many important creators in theater and performative arts. At the same time, there was no doubt that all those achievements were practical, they were "acts." In his tellingly entitled *Performer*, the most important of his late works, Grotowski stressed that

A man of knowledge [*człowiek poznania*] has at his disposal *the doing*, not ideas or theories. The true teacher – what does he do for the apprentice? He says: *do it*. The apprentice fights to understand, to reduce the unknown to the known, to avoid

doing. By the very fact that he wants to understand, he resists. He can understand only after he *does it*. He *does it*, or not. Knowledge is a matter of doing.¹

Grotowski repeatedly emphasized that he was a practitioner, that action is the key to the most important knowledge, and that words are of lesser, secondary importance.

And yet Grotowski's writings and even Grotowski as an author have been important aspects in research into his work. Given that Grotowski wrote several seminal works that have been broadly discussed, sometimes even memorized and granted cult status (as we like to put it today), this seems inevitable. *Towards a poor theater*], Holiday, *Theater of Sources or Performer* are all important not only in terms of the history of twentieth-century theater, but also as excellent, still functional linguistic compositions. Additionally, the Polish version of his *Teksty zebrane* [Collected Works] is 1131 pages long, containing 147 articles and essays; the oldest one dates back to 1954, when Grotowski was a twenty-one-year-old student of a theater academy, while the most recent one was dictated by the sick, bed-ridden artist in 1998. In short, literary activity was an important part of Grotowski's life and work. Therefore, the book has been broadly discussed, notably by Ludwik Flaszen and Zbigniew Osiński, who almost immediately noticed the specific tension and self-contradictions taking place at the interface of practice and theory, theater (performative art) and literature. It is those contradictions and paradoxes that have attracted scholars to the issue of "Grotowski and literature," and that seem to make it more than just one of many niche problems, of interest only to a small circle of scholars of Grotowski's life and work. For it would seem (and has been put forward) that the tension between a word and the act as observed in Jerzy Grotowski's works refers to a far broader phenomenon, which is one of the most important themes in Polish culture.

This is how Krzysztof Rutkowski, a scholar and author who has been fascinated with literature that goes towards acting, life-writing and "active poetry,"² saw it. He spent considerable time and energy on tracing deep sources of this concept, which he investigated in reference to Adam Mickiewicz.³ Rutkowski was also interested in Grotowski, whom he saw as a continuator of the practice and concept of active poetry, repeatedly stating that just as

¹ J. Grotowski, *Performer*, [in:] *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, eds. R. Schechner and L. Wolford, New York and London 1996, p. 374.

² See K. Rutkowski, *Przeciw (w) literaturze: esej o „poezji czynnej” Mirona Białoszewskiego i Edwarda Stachury* [Against (in) Literature: An Essay on Miron Białoszewski's and Edward Stachura's "Active Poetry"], Bydgoszcz 1987.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 65–116; see also K. Rutkowski, *Kiedy ciało było słowem. Kilka uwag o czynieniu poezji* [When Flesh Was Word: Some Remarks on Doing Poetry], "Kresy" 1998, no. 2(36), pp. 72–100; *idem*, *Bóg Adama* [Adam's God], Kraków 2021.

Mickiewicz gave up writing poems for doing poetry, Grotowski gave up directing plays for Art as Vehicle.⁴ Comparing the two authors on different levels (including biography – both were the only Polish lecturers at the Collège de France), Rutkowski points to their pursuit of rejecting what is formulated in writing in favor of the incarnated word, represented by the Slavic storyteller from Mickiewicz’s famous “theater lesson,” also discussed by Grotowski in *Montaż w pracy reżysera* [Montage in the Work of a Director].⁵ Rutkowski juxtaposes them in the concluding remarks to his essay *Człowiek zupełny* [Total Human Being], observing that they both contain a recurring “pathos formula” by Warburg, at the same time pointing to attempts (constantly present in Polish literature) at using literature as a means of getting to its incarnated source – the living word that was there at the beginning. This trend in literature, especially Romanticist, has been observed not only by Krzysztof Rutkowski (see e.g. Alina Witkowska’s *Mickiewicz. Słowo i czyn* [Mickiewicz: Word and Act]⁶), it is also clear in theater.⁷ It stems not only from a distrust for formulated words, according to the well-known, banal formula “words are unfaithful to thoughts,” but also from the conviction that a word can only fully exist through its incarnated realization. In this concept, written literature is an introduction to genuine, incarnated and acted words at most. The conviction that the total man is a complete word, stated repeatedly by Mickiewicz at the Collège de France,⁸ was supposed to be realized by Grotowski after leaving theater as a domain of the formalized word. Thus, in a way, he completed the tradition initiated by Mickiewicz.⁹

⁴ See K. Rutkowski, *Od poezji czynnej do Sztuki jako wehikulu* [From Active Poetry to Art as Vehicle], “Performer” 2011, no. 1, <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-1/od-poezji-czynnej-do-sztuki-jako-wehikulu> (accessed: 21.06.2021); *idem*, *Człowiek zupełny. Grotowski czytany w domu wariatów* [Total Man: Grotowski Read in a Madhouse], “Performer” 2019, no. 18, <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-18/czlowiek-zupelny-grotowski-czytany-w-domu-wariatow> (accessed: 21.06.2021).

⁵ See J. Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane*, eds. A. Adamiecka-Sitek, et al., Wrocław and Warszawa 2013, pp. 822–823.

⁶ A. Witkowska, *Mickiewicz. Słowo i czyn* [Mickiewicz: Word and Act], Warszawa 1998.

⁷ See D. Kosiński, *Żywostowie – zapomniane marzenie porzuconego patrona* [Livingwordness – Forgotten Dream of an Abandoned Patron], “Zeszyty Naukowe PWST im. Ludwika Solskiego w Krakowie” 2012, no. 4, pp. 46–52.

⁸ See e.g. the fragment about the living word (A. Mickiewicz, *Literatura słowiańska* [Slavic Literature], third course, lecture II, [in:] Adam Mickiewicz: *Dzieła* [Works], Wydanie Rocznicowe 1798–1998, vol. 10: *Literatura słowiańska: kurs trzeci* [Slavic Literature: Third Course], ed. J. Maślanka, trans. L. Płoszewski, Warszawa 1998, pp. 18–19), or the famous fragment about Jesus as “the only book of laws” (Mickiewicz Adam: *Literatura słowiańska*, third course, lecture XIII – study IV, *ibidem*, pp. 162–163).

⁹ I elaborated on this in my book *Polski teatr przemiany* [Polish Theater of Transformation], Wrocław 2007.

From this perspective, what would Grotowski's ideas – expressed in speech and in writing – be? As opposed to Mickiewicz, they would not give Grotowski recognition and master status, which would nonetheless have to be abandoned, as they only indicate the sphere of genuine fulfillment. In Grotowski's work, this role was played by theater. If his texts were comments on his work, at best they may be considered a signpost or guide pointing out to areas of proper action, changed in line with the evolution of practice. At worst, they can be seen as a “smoke screen” hiding actual goals and nature of actions. This is how Zbigniew Osiński, the author of numerous commentaries written in cooperation with Grotowski, saw them; towards the end of his life, Osiński realized they (and himself) were a tool in Grotowski's hands used for building his reputation. In his final book, Osiński stated clearly:

All his life, Grotowski watched over not only his own texts, on which he would work exceptionally meticulously before they were authorized, but also over texts by his coworkers, who had to follow the unwritten rule of obtaining his (or Flaszen's) approval for anything that was to be made public in any form. This is how Grotowski controlled both his own reception and that of his institution.¹⁰

Zbigniew Osiński loyally accepted the right of the artist, who believed he was in danger of being banned from working, deprived of his team, funds, etc., to create his own image through strictly controlled comments. However, later on he obviously thought that Grotowski was almost obsessed in controlling access to his speeches. For example, for years Grotowski would not allow to have the Polish translation of his *Towards a Poor Theatre* published – something Osiński did not understand.¹¹ For Osiński, Grotowski's texts were first and foremost a tool for constructing his image, whose purpose was to protect his actual explorations, significant practical work which differed from what he discussed in his texts. It is probably for this reason that in his last papers Osiński preferred to rely on private correspondence and notes taken during unofficial conversations with Grotowski, which constituted the core corpus of his monumental volume *Spotkania z Jerzym Grotowskim*.

Simplifying and constructing an opposition that may be slightly too unambiguous, for the sake of making my argument clear, I would say that although, according to Rutkowski, Grotowski viewed literature as an aux-

¹⁰ Z. Osiński, *Dzieło Jerzego Grotowskiego jako przedmiot badań* [Jerzy Grotowski's Work as a Research Subject], [in:] *idem, Spotkania z Jerzym Grotowskim. Notatki, listy, studium* [Encounters with Jerzy Grotowski: Notes, Letters, Study], Gdańsk 2013, pp. 279–280.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 277–278.

iliary tool for finding the way to the right field of explorations, according to interpretations closer to Osiński (and he is not the only one representing this perspective), it constitutes a costume or mask hiding true goals and methods. In order to reach them, in the first case one has to follow words but not become overly attached to them and abandon them altogether at the right moment (just as Grotowski abandoned the theater), whereas in the second case, one must fight against them, tear their fabric and rip away their mask (just as Grotowski took away masks of everyday life from his actors).

In spite of this oversimplification, it should be clear that both types of opposite actions (following and resisting) are justified and rooted in Grotowski's practices, and may be considered as consistent with his attitude. There is a certain paradox which allows light to be shed on how Grotowski treated literature, using it simultaneously as an indicator and obstacle, as well as a part of something perhaps more serious and unrelated to his purely tactical concerns with his image. Ludwik Flaszen, formal literary manager of Teatr 13 Rzędów, an informal and influential "personal critic" of Grotowski, himself an outstanding author, made the fullest comment regarding the ambivalence of and numerous functions played by literature in Grotowski's works:

Grotowski liked to say – admittedly, later in his career – that words and definitions were insignificant; that he would readily replace some phrase or word. Because what matters is practice, an act. However, he kept recording his experiences in texts, and he used text for announcing his reformatory, rebellious intentions to the world, especially in his youth.

[...]

He put words into the service of their proper vocation. An unparalleled master of the spoken word, outstanding orator, and – one could even say – preacher, and at the same time refined sophist, always waiting for the right moment, which he would always select carefully, to also put his ideas into writing, to publish them. [...] In spite of what he declared on multiple occasions, Grotowski attached a lot of weight to words. As if some published statement, or even one word or phrase could make or break him. Apart from the problem of political slips, which indeed could come at a cost in the world from before the Berlin Wall, what was that linguistic scrupulousness about? The Holy Precision, Madonna of his life? About the effectiveness and obviousness of Pavlov's conditional reflex? About the faith – in spite of himself and in spite of his declared convictions – in the power of Logos, even in its poor discursive form? Or perhaps about what is not put into words, does not exist, or does not exist enough? [...]

He gave up on his intention to follow in his master, Stanislawski's, footsteps, and write a handbook for actors, in order to avoid the trap of stereotypes – inevitable in such ventures – against which he had a genuine phobia. He sought the narrow

passage between Precision, which is the necessary condition for professionalism, and Life. In his chase after the Mystery of Life [...] he changed his methods of work and looked for words which could adequately name this tangible fluidity of experience. Grotowski practitioner – a man in constant pursuit of words...

To put it simply: Grotowski constantly needed terminology, terminological innovation. He claimed that practice outruns its discursive conceptualization. But has this always been the case? Were there no words that would outrun practice? Words-projects, words-intentions, words-dreams? Our Teatr Laboratorium [Lab Theater] started with the word “mystery play” – but when did Grotowski made it real?

And what was that masterpiece bearing Grotowski’s name and message without the accompanying textual production? Those phrases, descriptions of experiences, comments? They have multiple meanings, apart from the obvious one: they testify to something whose ontic status is evanescence. Verbalization, self-commentary, fortunate naming of objects all constitute necessary factors in cooling down the overheated apparatus, as well as an ingredient in fermentation.

The life of Grotowski’s speeches and texts is a separate subject of inquiry. In any case, one has to look for any sly intentions behind Grotowski’s caution in manipulating words with moderation – the wish to be in full control over his public image or Narcissus’s violent, insatiable pleasures when playing with mirrors.

Grotowski’s word games are rich and – after awkwardness, poetry, and utility characteristic for any young writer – they achieve peculiar harmony and sensible beauty. And so also writing was useful for Grotowski in becoming a successful theater director, guide for actors, master of performing arts and *Teacher of Performer*. Many of his texts, although initiated not on paper but as a result of energy exchange with his audience, became emblematic and can embellish any anthology of theater or artistic manifestos of 21st century.

And they will be an organic part of his encyclopedia entries. It is as if his work and commentary were one. This is not unusual in the age of numerous artistic revolutions, as each form of art had to rethink its own essence in order to face anxiety and keep up with the pace of changing times. In many cases a commentary matched the work it concerned, in some – it outgrew it. Those are two wings of the same creation, key part of its lifting surface.¹²

Flaszen’s analysis – perhaps the ultimate confirmation of Grotowski’s rank as an author – simultaneously reveals completely new oppositions, functions and meanings of literary work, which Flaszen believes to be a significant part of Grotowski’s work rather than an addition, curtain or instruction. On the most basic level – finding a name for some element of a designed or implemented practice created a specific way of acting, it not only allowed to understand and help others to understand what has been achieved and what has happened over the course of work, but also to deter-

¹² L. Flaszen, *Grotowski jako autor tekstów*, [in:] *idem, Grotowski & Company. Źródła i wariacje*, Wrocław 2014, pp. 344–346.

mine further directions and course of action. In this sense Grotowski often referred to his texts as “logbooks,” at the same time opposing generalizing them and treating them as beyond-historical diagnoses or sets of rules.

The programmatic *Możliwość teatru* [Possibility of a Theatre], published in 1962 in the second issue of “Materiały warsztatowe Teatru 13 Rzędu” [Workshop Materials of 13 Rows Theater] (in fact – the only text of that issue) is a clear example of such a text. It opens with a characteristic disclaimer:

These are working notes resulting from a specific theater practice, from the conviction that traditional theater has become outdated, and from considerations regarding whether theater is possible today.

The present text has no academic ambitions. It is just a diary of searching, an example of certain possible solutions. It has a documentary character, and so whenever possible, author used citations regarding his practice from external sources.¹³

Indeed, Grotowski combines his own comments with comments by critics in a way which clearly indicates that he treats them not only as testaments of reception, but first and foremost – as tools which allow him to better understand his own work and determine its future course. For example, this is how the phrase “dialectics of mockery and apotheosis”¹⁴ from Tadeusz Kudliński’s review of *Forefathers’ Eve* published on July 7, 1961 in “Dziennik Polski” is used. Grotowski adopted it, reinterpreted it, and started using it in reference to earlier performances at his theater (starting from George Byron’s *Cain*, which premiered on January 30, 1960), as well as those which were still works in progress when the text was written (*Kordian* by Juliusz Słowacki, which premiered on February 14, 1962). The famous phrase that later made an international career became a test allowing aspects of Grotowski’s work to be extracted that may not have been obvious. As the art of finding such phrases, literature thus became Grotowski’s necessary, constantly recurring partner.

Although the need to record “logbooks” is understandable, logbooks are not public records, and they are never shared during a cruise. Meanwhile, Grotowski typically not only wrote down his ideas and formulas while his work was unfinished, tried to apply them to his future and past work, but he also made the whole process public. Why? Obviously, the need to attract attention to the unique character of his work, to be understood as much

¹³ J. Grotowski, *Możliwość teatru*, [in:] *idem, Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, p. 209.

¹⁴ T. Kudliński, “*Dziady*” w 13 Rzędach [Forefathers’ Eve at 13 Rows Theater], [in:] *Misterium zgrozy i urzeczenia. Przedstawienia Jerzego Grotowskiego i Teatru Laboratorium* [A Mystery of Fright and Charm: Performances by Jerzy Grotowski and Teatr Laboratorium], eds. J. Degler and G. Ziółkowski, Wrocław 2006, p. 140.

as possible, or even – what Osiński believed to be the correct answer – the need to design the reception of his art and self may all be important factors here. However, this explanation seems insufficient, especially in the light of significant numbers of similar texts, including those written when Grotowski was famous and so did not have problems with attracting interest. It would seem that Grotowski used his “logbooks” in order to present himself as someone who was constantly seeking, on his way, forever responding to his “main temptation.” If his texts indeed are logbooks, they resemble those written by Witold Gombrowicz, who was not only well-known to Grotowski, but also inspired him to draw important conclusions.¹⁵ Grotowski surely would not place “T” at the beginning at the beginning of each subsequent day, and he refrained from personal confessions (he shared them only occasionally). Seen from a certain angle, his texts constitute a stage on which – similarly to Gombrowicz in *Dzienniki* [Journals] – he created himself as an artist and thinker.

This creation goes beyond image, it is genuinely dynamic and dramatic. It presents the protagonist and subject in constant motion, creating himself also as a reaction to what happens to him when he interacts with other actors (including non-human ones). Like Gombrowicz’s protagonist from *Dzienniki*, Grotowski’s protagonist simultaneously acts and observes himself in the act, together with forces that transform his plans and intentions, which create “depth”, or, as Grotowski put it, “egregores.”¹⁶ Thus both of them almost constantly analyzed their own adventures in the theater of everyday life. One clear difference between them is the level of subjectivity: Grotowski was much more inclined towards generalizations, and was more prone to presenting and interpreting his own experiences as part of “the human condition.” However, the difference between their answers to the question of what to do in the face of such a “interpersonal” fate seems more significant. While Gombrowicz seems to perceive it as a modern symptom of tragedy, and is unable to find ways of escaping from its power apart from the weak (and, from today’s perspective, naïve) allegory of “forever young nudity,” Grotowski treats being on that stage as a certain strategic necessity, incessantly, stubbornly, and successfully finding radically different scenes and spaces of denuding and encountering in honesty. Grotowski uses literature both as a tool for exploring the interpersonal theatre of everyday life (as Gombrowicz did) and for constantly verifying already achieved results

¹⁵ On relationships between Gombrowicz and Grotowski, see D. Kosiński, *S/G*, [in:] *Słowacki/Grotowski. Rekontekstualizacje* [Recontextualizations], eds. D. Kosiński and W. Świątkowska, Wrocław 2010, pp. 61–76.

¹⁶ See *Rozmowa z Grotowskim [rozmawiał Andrzej Bonarski]* [An interview with Grotowski by Andrzej Bonarski], [in:] J. Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, pp. 599–600.

and directions for future “special projects.” In doing this he was fully aware of how easy and quickly the power of the interpersonal can distort them and use them to its own advantage.

Thus also from this perspective the key element of Grotowski’s writing is the procedure of naming one’s own achievements, which simultaneously determines the future action plan. It gained importance especially when his practice eluded the culturally recognizable frameworks of the institution and art of “theater.” This was when Grotowski used his careful, precise verbal compositions as a project and challenge for something that was yet to come.

Święto (Holiday), which opens and founds the post-theater phase of Grotowski’s work, is an especially significant example of this strategy, and, for one formation, even mythical. This text is located between initial, unique experiences (“I am trying here – as far as I can – to touch something from experiences from encountering with man, experiences which are completely different from traditional, but very tangible”¹⁷), and a sense of the future unraveling (“what is weak and uncertain is pulsing towards my its birth. Something somewhat new between people – not yet existing, but already perceptible, half a reflex, half a need”¹⁸). Here Grotowski adopts the position of a mediator, or “pontifex, the maker of bridges”¹⁹ between already noticeable events and achievable, constant, repetitive practice, which makes them not an excess, but a tool, a vehicle. Grotowski wrote the text, but he also performed it in two ways: first as someone who did not write it, but performed it, and secondly, as someone who uses text as a vehicle for future actions.

Numerous elements of *Holiday* clearly refer to a very peculiar “executive” situation, creating an image of an individual as a person talking in a specific situation, and so not a writer, but a word performer, considering the different theme and style, somewhat resembling Mickiewicz’s “story-teller” (and Mickiewicz the lecturer himself). This is the role Grotowski consistently adopted from the late 1960s on, when he almost completely stopped writing; his subsequent texts were in fact transcriptions of numerous lectures, meetings with fans, and interviews. Each contains clear signals confirming the unique character of a speech given in a specific place, at a specific time (even if one text was actually several different speeches put together, which was a relatively frequent occurrence). In the case of *Holiday* (and many other texts from 1970s), there are obvious references to

¹⁷ J. Grotowski, *Święto*, p. 955; the “mythical” reference is a quote from the original, 1970 version from the Appendix to the Polish edition of *Teksty zebrane*. The English version translated by Bolesław Taborski and reworked many years later for *Grotowski Sourcebook* significantly differs from the first publication in Polish.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 956.

¹⁹ J. Grotowski, *Performer*, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

questions which were removed from the final version of the text. Grotowski gives a monologue, but at the same time by talking to specific people he creates a surprising sense of a gap, lacunae. The communicative situation is textually restaged, or it is realized in such a way as to create a sense of defect and uncertainty. Specific situations in which Grotowski said the words recorded in the text belong to the past. The text is only its shadow, and interlocutors are lacunae filled by the reader, who is at the same time faced with a future-oriented challenge.

The empty places left by the original interlocutors should be taken by ones from the future, which creates the second dimension of this textual performance – an announcement, vague, uncertain, formally often just metaphors, and simultaneously crossed out as metaphors by stressing their specificity and tangibility. Grotowski is unable to create this tangibility other than by a certain effect founded on some sort of a “minimal promise.” He promises that there is some mechanism, a need or shared goal, and this is the foundation for an expected process addressed as an ethical call to anyone who finds themselves in a place left empty by real interlocutors from the past. Thus Grotowski does not analyze, he does not give a testament to his work, but he acts via words. Let us consider how this happens in one of key fragments of *Holiday*, which directly concerns words and acts:

there is something which remains the same in all epochs, or at least in those when people are aware of their human condition – this is the quest. The quest for what is the most essential in life. Different names have been invented to call it; in the past these names usually had a religious sound. I do not think it possible for myself to invent religious names; what's more I do not feel any need at all for inventing words. But the question of what is the most essential in life, which some of you may think abstract, really is of great import, and no one who denies the quest will be happy. Many people do reject it; they feel obliged to smile as if they were advertizing tooth paste. But why are they so sad? Maybe they have missed something in life? Maybe they never asked themselves the only question they ought to have asked. It must be asked. And the answer? One can't formulate it, one can only do it.²⁰

The first part is a promise about the character of a certain basic, general rule, which is later transformed into an ethical obligation and a challenge for the future. This fragment also introduces the difference between literature as “inventing words” and an answer which “cannot be put into words, it can only be done” in practice. The space between them is taken by the question – paradoxically, never asked, by its absence resembling questions

²⁰ J. Grotowski, *Holiday – the Day That Is Holy*, trans. R. Taborski, “The Drama Review” 1973, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 117.

from listeners removed from the text. Consistently, there is not one occurrence of the person asking – there is only Grotowski answering and at the same time promising that the answer must be given. By declaring his lack of interest in inventing words he simultaneously indicates the necessity to “ask” (and so put into words) the question. Thus he both denies the need for words and confirms their significance.

I consider this moment to be crucial and characteristic. In his texts Grotowski undertook one of key themes in contemporary literature – its own ambivalence resulting from remaining in tension between long lost faith in the directness and transparency of words, and the need to create them. Of course it is not true that Grotowski rejected literature. Like many contemporary authors he tried to avoid becoming “addicted to the magic meaning of words.” In an interview with René Gaudy and Michele Bataillon he warned: “Words must not be alienated. They always have a certain relationship with life, and it is the only thing that matters.”²¹ This relationship with life, in his case – with practice and seeking, to which he devoted his own life – was also what his almost constant abandoning of formulae, first adopted and then fought against, to be ultimately given up on, including his own, was about – so frustrating for scholars. After abandoning theater he discussed that topic in clear terms:

Neither do I think that inventing words is the most important. [...] Once certain words become too well-known, they need to be abandoned immediately. It is no coincidence that I have not used the term “poor theater” in years: it is used by too many who do not really know what it means. If one looks for terminology, the whole thing starts to function on the level of ideas, it becomes detached from experience. In everyday life, we constantly juggle with thoughts and terms, believing that this is how we are able to touch living experiences, whereas in fact, we are moving away from them.²²

A negative program of avoiding this negative magic of words will not be enough to stop it – positive action, i.e. creatively impeding its action, will also be necessary. This is something to which Grotowski devoted a great deal of time and effort: not only did he stop using certain phrases, but first and foremost he invented new ones, far more powerful, the power often stemming from their almost poetic vagueness. “Poor theater,” “complete act,” “Holiday,” “sources,” Action and Performer – these are all terms which Grotowski constantly described, explained, reinterpreted, creating what

²¹ *Grotowski a estetyka teatralna* [Grotowski and the Theater Aesthetic] [an interview by René Gaudy and Michel Bataillon], [in:] J. Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, p. 304.

²² J. Grotowski, *Co było* [What Used to Be], [in:] *idem, Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, p. 1003.

I would call over-clarity. For example, when explaining what he meant by “complete act,” he multiplies terms, references and associations, which creates a whole whirl of words, resulting in an overproduction of phrases that mutually exclude their adequacy. If there are so many, and new ones keep coming, one can suppose that none of them is adequate, they are all only approximations, and outlining a quiet place, a wordless “zone,” whose creation and mediated experience is possible only via literature, becomes the ultimate goal of literary creation, determining its value and meaning.

Grotowski coined a very accurate term for this paradox of literature: “silence of the word.” Although typically he used it in a more practical and specific meaning, simply for the lack of a surplus of words spoken,²³ the way he used it also contains another aspect – silence, which is strictly connected with words, or even paradoxical silence spoken through words. It would seem that it was close to what Krzysztof Rutkowski (already cited here) saw as the basis of the deep connection between Mickiewicz and Grotowski:

Tone, *Stimmung*, is what makes the existence of active poetry and art as a vehicle possible. Mickiewicz’s analyses of poetry, and Grotowski’s work on physical actions which comprise art as a vehicle, strive towards a certain tone, *Stimmung*, which precedes language and shines as a pure place for the word. Tone, *Stimmung*, played a major role in Hegel’s and Heidegger’s philosophy, as well as in German romanticist poetry. Novalis defined *Stimmung* as soul acoustics. The notion of *Stimmung* took over Mickiewicz’s vision through Towiański; Mickiewicz dreamed about active poetry, poetry whose sound would be in sync with *Stimmung* and with the present of the word. Sound and the word are in harmony with each other, but they do not touch nor see each other. When sound touches, it simultaneously pierces through and kills. A bow is armed with the word, from a distance, invisible, in the air. Voice is first and foremost the sound of a vibrating chord. The way it vibrates creates *Stimmung*. The voice resulting from vibrations, *Stimme*, is genuine active poetry, a primitive elevator carrying the actor from the level of thick energy to subtle energy thanks to the power of art as a vehicle.²⁴

According to Rutkowski, tone, “silence of the word,” i.e. what can be heard in a word apart from what is audible as a word understood in any

²³ “The word should only be said when it is necessary, because then it is important. One can walk through a forest at night and hear nothing – a bird crying, rustle of trees, and the reason is that we are constantly «blabbing»: we grunt, we smoke, we turn on lights. There is a song, which does not disturb birds singing. And thus silence is the basis: the silence of words, silence of sounds, silence of movements. Silence gives a chance to important words and a song which does not interfere with the speech of birds” (J. Grotowski, *Theater of sources*, [in:] *idem, Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, p. 971).

²⁴ K. Rutkowski, *Od poezji czynnej do Sztuki jako wehikulu, op. cit.*

way, is the ultimate and deepest goal of literature. It is literature's mystery. If we were to agree that Mickiewicz and Grotowski were indeed connected by seeking that silence, I would also say that there was a significant difference between them in terms of literature: despite everything, Mickiewicz sought the Word while remaining in literature's territory, which he wanted to transform by going against it. Grotowski, on the other hand, practiced literature as a vehicle of mystery experienced beyond literature and theater. He stubbornly worked with words, he used words as a tool and a stage, he did not stay within them – instead, he almost incessantly pointed out to the wordless, physical, but not voiceless. Mickiewicz wanted to fulfill literature, whereas Grotowski sought fulfillment beyond it, beyond words, in action. However, this does not mean that he disregarded literature – in fact, it would seem that although he abandoned theater, he did not abandon literature, and he remained faithful to it as the most important vehicle allowing him to reach fulfillment, and at the same time understand and cognize its radical otherness.

Perhaps this is how we should understand yet another paradoxical formula used by Grotowski as the title of one of his texts: *Działanie jest dosłowne* [Action Is Literal]. Grotowski understands this literality as the opposite of representation, treating elements of reality as always referring to something beyond the here and now. And it is in this context that he discusses the surplus of words:

If someone feels that something is really happening, then – in order to avoid this feeling – they search for words, they try to put it into words. For example: “Oh! Look at this beautiful sunset!”. The moment they say that they are freed from “experiencing a sunset”, because “sunset” becomes an instrument for expressing their aesthetic sensation and a pretext for talking. Not saying anything seems horrible.²⁵

Meanwhile, a moment later, Grotowski adds that in order to experience what is happening as it is, “it is enough to be silent,” almost immediately followed by: “And being silent does not mean being motionless. Oftentimes in order to experience silence one has to run.”²⁶ For Grotowski, literature was a necessary preparation for that run, a workout required to make the run literal.

Andrzej Tarkowski's final movie, *The Sacrifice* (1986) is barely watchable. A lot is said in it, and the number of words pouring from the screen are not an example of good film literature. On the contrary, it annoys with its pseudointellectual prattle and analyzing over and over again the same

²⁵ J. Grotowski, *Działanie jest dosłowne*, [in:] *idem, Teksty zebrane, op. cit.*, p. 626.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 628.

ideas which are quite banal in essence. When the story finally ends, and the main protagonist – following a grotesquely long scene – is taken to hospital, we see his mute son stubbornly watering a dry tree. Suddenly, the boy says: “In the beginning was the word. Why, why, father?” And then only the tree and music. Silence of words.

Translated by Paulina Zagórska

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