
THE SYMBOLIST LEGACY

Daniel Gerould

For us everything has become cramped, stifling, unbearable. We are weary of conventional forms of society, conventional forms of morality, the very means of perception, everything that comes from outside. It is becoming clearer and clearer that if what we see is all that there is in the world, then there is nothing worth living for. We embrace all religions, all mystical doctrines rather than exist in this reality.

Valerii Briusov, Preface to A. Miropolsky's *Stairs*, 1903

The present-day return to the spiritual in art, characteristic of both the visual and performing arts in the first decade of the twenty-first century is part of a recurrent pattern, a periodic need to go back to eternal sources and reestablish contact with the deepest well-springs of human creativity in the sacred, however that may be defined. Prior to the present moment, the most significant manifestation of this phenomenon in modern times was the prominence of place given to the occult in the symbolist movement of *fin-de-siècle* Europe circa 1900. It is this legacy that I wish to examine in order to locate the origins of our new spirituality in the perennial rediscovery of older, hidden traditions. I intend to deal only with the broad ideas, omitting the tangled anecdotal history of the sectarian conflicts within and among the different groups of occultists.

Reacting hostilely to a smug materialistic world, celebrated as *la belle époque*, which was obsessed by modernity and progress and prided itself on being technologically advanced, the French symbolists, at the threshold of modernism, shunned the surface here-and-now and sought reconnections with “lost” pasts rich in associations, analogies, and resonances.

Whereas co-existing positivistic naturalism embraced the contemporary world in all its specificity and unquestioningly accepted the premises of its reality, symbolism—as the first manifestation of modernism that challenged modernity—can be called an archaic avant-garde seeking legitimacy not in progress but in pre-history. Despite its apparently anti-modern stance, symbolism was a pivotal moment in the evolution of modernism because it undermined the whole edifice of a logical, explicable

world of matter through which it discerned the lineaments of a higher order of the spirit. The seemingly solid façade of the nineteenth century was all illusion; reality lay beyond and below. Recognizing the illusory nature of the material world, the journey would be made back to the spirit.

Unlike subsequent bellicose and iconoclastic avant-gardes such as futurism or dada, which declared war on all that had gone before, symbolism—more contemplative and ecumenical—sought not a rejection of the past, but a reclamation of large bodies of secret knowledge and reconciliation of older, forgotten wisdom with the latest perceptions and insights. As the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann had recently made expeditions to Asia Minor in search of Troy, so the symbolists undertook mental journeys to unearth the deepest sources of divine wisdom in archaic Greek art and culture. However, rather than confining themselves to the narrow rationalized neo-classical version of the Greek heritage upon which the official culture of the French state was founded, they found in the Dionysian mysteries analogues to Hindu, Egyptian, and Biblical mythologies. They looked back to a primordial fountainhead of transnational wisdom in the sacred books of the past at the same time that they looked within to create a new system of personal belief. This theurgic idea was predicated on the ancient wisdom of old cultures with a common source in sacred rites of ancient and archaic Greece. The brilliant Russian director-playwright-theorist Nikolai Evreinov did ethnographic research on the origins of tragedy in goat-songs, traveling to sites in Asia Minor.

What is modern about the symbolist vision is not a mimetic representation of the contemporary world, but its supersensible perceptions of a higher spiritual reality, apprehension of underlying patterns beneath the surface. In the case of Vassily Kandinsky (author of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1911, and the abstract drama *The Yellow Sound*, 1909) and Piet Mondrian, this desire to portray spiritual realities eventually led to abstraction, and, in the case of Alexander Scriabin, to multimedia spectacle.

THE THEURGIC IDEA

The symbolists sought to reestablish continuities with both past and future through a synthesis of world religions that were imbued with non-denominational mysticism joining Eastern and Western traditions of belief. Pan was a reigning deity in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature. Earth-, sky-, and ocean-centered, symbolism viewed humankind as an element in a natural landscape, subject to the diurnal and seasonal cycles; sun, moon, and planets provided perspective. Thus, on the one hand, the symbolist vision was cosmic rather than social and collective. On the other hand, it was deeply subjective, located in the inner recesses of the psyche. And the two—macrocosm and microcosm—mirrored one another. The deep structure of the human mind corresponds to the deep structure of the universe.

Yet interiority was the point of departure and of return. Instead of dramatizing *faits divers*, usually stories of crimes of passion, culled from newspapers, as was the practice of Zola and his followers, the artist looks within for what is essential,

timeless, unchanging. Symbolists insisted on the primacy of spiritual realities, which experienced subjectively lead to the release of the creative powers of the imagination. The private could become public and effect social change only following inner transformation. The symbolist legacy includes a powerful belief in the transformative power of the theatre, not as social action, but spiritual immersion. The sacred is a human reality revealed by the prophets rather than an otherworldly revelation coming from a god outside humankind. The sole subject of art is “our veritable self, our first-born self, immemorial, unlimited, universal, and probably immortal,” wrote Maurice Maeterlinck in his 1902 work, *The Buried Temple*.

For *fin-de-siècle* symbolists, theosophy—divine wisdom—was the synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy that served as the basis of their understanding of art. Not a matter of faith, but an acquired knowledge of the magical psychic powers latent in man, theosophy explored the theurgic idea of occult art, involving rites and incantations for controlling divine and beneficent spirits. In 1888 Helena Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, a work of comparative esotericism, set out the basic tenets of theosophy, an alternative to materialism, rationalism, and positivism designed to resolve tensions between science and religion.

In 1901, Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater’s *Thought-Forms* discussed the power of thought to mold astral entities and expounded a theory of spiritual ideograms that explained mystical power of forms, colors, sounds, and odors. First published in 1889 and constantly republished, Edouard Schuré’s *The Great Initiates* set out the central lines of an esoteric doctrine stretching from Rama and Krishna to Plato and Jesus. Beneath the diversity of rites, myths, and religions, there is a common doctrine of the mysteries. In the absence of any shared system of dogmatic belief, the symbolists found in the syncretic union of ancient mysteries the stimulus needed for creativity.

A NEW MYTHOLOGY

Reaching back to the Greeks, to early Christianity, to Gnosticism and the heretical sects and apochryphal texts, the Symbolists reinterpreted myths eclectically and subjectively and created new mythologies that were intensely personal, subjective, and mysterious. Two myths not the subjects of drama in classical times, Orpheus and Narcissus, came to the fore as master myths of symbolism. Orpheus, the embodiment of music and poetry, undergoes Dionysian sacrifice to achieve an Apollonian triumph of his art. Mythologies were less valued for their narratives than for their imagery and atmosphere as bearers of ideas and images. Alive and contemporary, myth became an embodiment of wisdom and prophecy for the present age as bearers of secret meaning.

Symbolist myths are the incarnation of human dreams and anxieties beyond time and space. Symbolists are the first moderns to experience myth as multicultural and transnational. Cut loose from neoclassical moorings, myths were set free to voyage on the high seas; for the first time myths are set free as archetypal models.

The mythic heroes were creators and receivers of poetry and the arts. They were voyagers, discoverers, and healers.

RETURN TO ANCIENT TRAGEDY ON SACRED SITES

The mandate calling for a return to the sources of ancient tragedy led *fin-de-siècle* artists to envisage performances enacted on sacred sites. Following Nietzsche's speculations about the relations of audience to spectacle in *The Birth of Tragedy*, symbolist theorists and practitioners tried to recreate the spiritual dimensions of ancient tragedy. They designed, built, or imagined vast outdoor or intimate indoor theatres where their dramas could be enacted before audiences of initiates.

It was at this time that modern ideas of active audiences and collective creation first took shape. Symbolist theorists thought hard about how to achieve the participation of spectators. Turning to ancient sources of art and spiritual culture, the poet and playwright Vyacheslav Ivanov preached communality in the arts (*sobornost'*), hoping to bring about a universal brotherhood of spectators, actors, dancers, and choruses in a common ecstasy. "The crowd of spectators must fuse into a choral body, like the mystical communities of ancient orgies and mysteries," Ivanov maintained. Performances frequently took place in his fifth-floor St. Petersburg apartment, a corner rotunda called The Tower, where the symbolist artists and philosophers met regularly every Wednesday. Ivanov and his disciples sometimes arrayed themselves in ancient garb and reenacted ancient ceremonies and rituals that were both Dionysian and Christian. Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Blok, and Mikhail Kuzmin directed performances of plays involving choral singing and group dancing. After 1919 Ivanov favored choric actions, popular festivals, and outdoor performances of heroic legends.

Adopting Ivanov's notion of a Theatre-Temple, the Polish poet and playwright Tadeusz Miciński (a frequent visitor to the Tower), called for the creation of a universal temple of beauty in the Tatra Mountains, which he associated with the Himalayas and the origins of ancient Indian religions, "where in an amphitheatre of the dead and living, carved in the mountains, under the azure sky and among the deep forests, there will be revealed the mysteries of life on earth," and where Sanskrit dramas, such as *Shakuntala* could be performed. Pan-slavist, historiographer seeking the roots of Western civilization in India, and translator of the great thirteenth-century Persian mystic poem Jalal-Al-Din Maulavi, Miciński envisaged theatre, at once primeval and social, that would unite East and West, reconcile Catholicism, Orthodox faith, and Hinduism, and bring Poland and Russia together on the basis of gnosticism and esoteric philosophy. In his 1905 essay "Theatre-Temple," which argues for a theatre that purifies the soul, Miciński writes, "If we look at the Persian *Ta'zia*, which mourns the death of the prophet Ali, or at the medieval mystery plays with Adam and Eve, Satan, the Apostles and Christ's Passion—everywhere at the sources of drama we find the sphinx of Religion."

Place is invested with special import. A pioneering site-specific performance took place in 1911 when Georgette Leblanc staged two performances of Maeterlinck's

translation of *Macbeth* in his castle in Normandy at the fourteenth-century Abbey of Saint-Wandrille bordered by a forest. For Maeterlinck, *Macbeth* was Shakespeare's most profound occult work. The audience of sixty spectators moved about the grounds following the action from Macbeth's arrival on horseback at the gates to the terrifying events inside the castle. The poet-playwright-painter Stanisław Wyspiański projected a stage "on the sacred national soil" by the Royal Castle of Wawel in Cracow overlooking the Vistula and at the same time dreamed of an enormous theatre under the open sky in the Tatra Mountains, with the lofty peaks serving as the wings and the deep blue waters of a small lake suggesting the auditorium. Wyspiański conceived of his *Acropolis* as being played within the Royal Castle Wawel in Cracow; all the characters in the play are animated art works found in the castle (from the Bible or Homer) who have stepped out of their tapestries or off their pedestals.

SYMBOLIST COLLABORATIONS AND MULTIPLE VOCATIONS

Taking the unity of the arts as one of their cardinal beliefs, the symbolists totally rejected Dumas fils's "well-made" conception of playwriting as special craft separate from other intellectual and artistic endeavors and of the playwright as a technician skilled at manipulating stage effects who need have no broader or deeper concerns. In their view, theatre exists in relation to the other arts; at its highest points it represents a synthesis of the arts. The symbolists sought to bring about such a fusion of the arts by pursuing dual or multiple vocations and by collaborating with other artists.

The Lithuanian Mikalojus Ciurlionis, a musician who became a visionary painter, was able to devise a new pictorial language to express a religion of the cosmos by applying musical compositional forms and principles to painting. He developed his own cosmology. He translated his musical creative impulses into colors and shapes using the analogy of the seven colors of the solar spectrum and the seven tones of the chromatic scale. Inspired by neo-Platonic aspiration toward a higher existence and endowed with cosmic memory, he transcended his own time and place moving to a universality of the spirit. His perspective was that of the mind contemplating the whole universe. Moving toward the abstraction of spheres and circles, he composed visual sonatas portraying fantastic "infinite" landscapes imbued with mysticism in different movements about the sun, different planets, and signs of zodiac. The natural is supernatural. Admired by Ivanov and the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstvo*) circle, Ciurlionis declared, "I would like to create a symphony out of the sound of the waves, the mysterious language of a hundred-year-old forest, the twinkling of the stars, out of our songs and my boundless yearning."

The symbolists saw theatre as a collaboration among artists, and, in keeping with their belief in the unity of the arts, sought out like-minded artists in other media. No era was richer in collaborative alliances that established outstanding partnerships. Poets worked with dancers, as in the case of William Butler Yeats and Michio Ito, a modern dancer who knew almost nothing about Noh, had had eclectic training, and was open to experiment (making him a perfect collaborator for Yeats). It was Yeats who brought the knowledge of Noh, which he had acquired from Ezra Pound.

Ito came to study and appreciate Noh, and eventually brought the new form he had created with Yeats back to Japan in a Japanese translation of *The Hawk's Well*.

For Yeats, the function of art was to invoke spiritual realities. A séance enthusiast, Yeats considered spiritualism a modern religion and visited many mediums in the hope of contacting the dead, who he felt were always near. Believing in the power of mediumship (with its stars, special effects, farewell performances) to make superb theatre, Yeats collected information received from the dead. He invoked the doctrine of a world-soul or Anima Mundi, from which creativity derived. This world-soul, joined to the Great Memory, explains the symbolist exaltation of playwright as a creator attuned to the collective unconscious.

The interdisciplinary collaboration between the Belgian painter Jean Delville and the Russian musician Alexander Scriabin was another milestone in the symbolist attempt to forge a new language drawing upon the various arts.

SCRIABIN'S MYSTERIUM

Beginning in 1902 Scriabin conceived of a ritual with antiphonal dialogue of narrator and chorus that would enact a terrestrial and cosmic transformation, uniting feminine and masculine principles and transcending the "I" and "Non-I." Spectators would be votaries performing dances and assisting in the Dionysian rituals that would lead to the final cosmic apocalypse: a world conflagration of matter, time, and space. A multimedia of sound, sight, smell, feel, dance, and décor, Scriabin's eschatological mysterium is a great cataclysmic work ushering in the end of the world, synthesizing all the arts, and moving beyond the limits of the separate arts and of art in general.

For Scriabin, who rejected the concept of masquerade, the theatre was essentially antireligious, and therefore sinful, because it substitutes for the truth a masque of multiple reincarnations and supports the illusion of life. The role of the mysterium was to overthrow theatre and restore the integrity of self-unity. Scriabin rejected the decadent theatrical life of Paris, the cult of theatre in Moscow, and Meyerhold's theatre of Masks, lamenting that "Our entire society is being converted into a theatrical production. It tries to achieve a semblance of life in its artificiality. Our own lives begin to acquire a theatrical character because of inner division and outer dispersion. We become stage actors performing for ourselves, possessed by a passion for self-analysis." In Moscow Scriabin frequented Tairov's Kamerny Theatre, where he particularly liked Kalidasa's Sanskrit drama, *Shakuntala* (1914), performed musically and rhythmically as an opera-ballet full of pantomime and processions. With Alice Koonen, Tairov's wife and lead actress, Scriabin created gestural pieces set to music, which she danced.

On an extended visit to Brussels in 1908 Scriabin became involved with a circle of friends drawn together by their shared interest in theosophy. With Delville, a symbolist painter and author of a treatise, "The Mission of Art," the Russian composer

dreamed of creating an all-encompassing work of art combining colors, shapes, and sounds.

For his projected *mysterium* Scriabin worked on creating a new language that was derived from Sanskrit roots, but included cries, interjections, exclamations, and sounds of breath being inhaled and exhaled to suggest the breathing of the cosmos. The Russian composer would have endorsed Tadeusz Miciński's declaration that "The Church, the sole true Church, is the Cosmos." Scriabin practiced light-color-sound synesthesia. For a public showing of Delville's monumental painting, *Prometheus*, there were light projections corresponding to notes played by Scriabin.

For his symphonic *Prometheus, Poem of Fire* (1909–10), Scriabin called for a keyboard of lights, or color organ, which could project colors on a screen or in the audience. The "color music" was to be determined by the notes. Delville did the cover design for the score, but Scriabin's project was not realized until 1967 at a performance by the Rochester Philharmonic at which Alex Ushakoff (a film producer and designer of space simulation systems for astronauts) scattered colors throughout the auditorium. Prometheus's fires, colors, and lights are meta-symbols of man's highest thoughts.

FUTURE UTOPIAS: SYMBOLIST SCIENCE FICTION

Looking beyond and through the here and now, the temporal and immediate, symbolists take a long view of the present from a dual perspective of past and future. Considering revolution as an act of the spirit and social change achievable through transformation of the individual, they are drawn to apocalypse, metamorphoses of humanity, and visions of utopia and dystopia. Symbolists were among the pioneers in the creation of modern science fiction: Villiers in *The Future Eve* (1886), Jarry in *Doctor Faustrol* (1911), Briusov in his play *The Earth* (1904) and novella *Republic of the Southern Cross*, Sologub in his epic trilogy *The Created Legend* (1905–1913), which Meyerhold planned to film, and Miciński in his *Nietota: Secret Book of the Tatras Mountains* (1910) and *Father Faust* (1913). These works, informed by demi-urgic consciousness, draw heavily on the Faust myth in their portrayal of imaginary societies in conflict making use of weird inventions to forge mystical weapons. Their work reflects the resurgence of the supernatural in high art. Inspired by Platonic idealism, they experimented with horror literature, the grotesque, and the fantastic, including the mass culture motif of puppet-soul in robots, androids, and cyborgs. Maurice Maeterlinck initially conceived his essay, "The Tragical in Daily Life," as "A Theatre of the Android," since he wished to eliminate the human actor and replace living human beings onstage by simulacra.

Curious about all aspects of art and culture and ambivalent, a symbolist like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam did not reject modern science and technology, but incorporated them within a larger vision and higher wisdom capable of effecting a unifying reconciliation of spirituality and science. He tests the facile belief in progress characteristic of late nineteenth-century positivism. In his *Cruel Tales*, Villiers shows that the new technologies of advertising and mass marketing when applied to the arts will create a virtual world of fraud and sham, peopled by simulacra. But Villiers writes

as a visionary thinker—in the company of mystics like Swedenborg, Blake, and Goethe—who are able to think in a spiritual arena where the religious and the scientific imagination can meet. In *The Future Eve*, Edison, who as the wizard of Menlo Park is a modern mythic hero of electricity, gradually assumes the lineaments of Prometheus, the bearer of light to humankind. Villiers is able to reveal old mythologies as antecedents of new. The symbolists saw science not as superseding previous knowledge, but as part of an ongoing human quest for wisdom, a link in the chain of secret knowledge.

THE FADING OF SYMBOLISM

Although it enjoyed an enduring afterlife in poetry in a number of countries, the fortunes of symbolism on stage fell to a low point in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s when a socially engaged, politicized theatre dominated by ideology gained ascendancy as a result of changed social circumstances. The First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the rise of totalitarian dictatorships throughout Europe, Fascism and Communism, World War II, and the Holocaust made the idea of a “theatre of the soul” seem an elitist aberration and its obsession with death and the other world decadent and unseemly. Social activists self-righteously condemned the symbolists as reactionary (although they had in fact been predominantly socialist and anarchist in political leaning). At the time of the First World War, under the influence of anthroposophy, Andrei Bely left Russia to become Rudolph Steiner’s disciple in Dornach, Valerii Briusov and Alexander Blok tried to embrace Bolshevism and come to terms with the new regime, while Sologub, who stuck to his anti-authoritarian symbolist beliefs in unfettered human creativity was branded a formalist out of touch with Soviet reality and denied permission to emigrate.

For the next several post-1914 generations a “theatre of the soul” under the banner of transcendent spirituality could not help but appear a narcissistic and self-indulgent escape into vague private mythologies and somnambulistic introspection. The revival of ancient mystery cults with obscure rituals seemed a flagrant evasion of responsibility and a refusal to confront real issues in the real world.

REINSTATEMENT OF SYMBOLISM

Symbolism was rediscovered and popularized in the 1970s, in large part because of major revisionism in the art-historical appraisal of the *fin-de-siècle* painters such as Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Ferdinand Khnopff, and Jean Delville, who had always been regarded as of questionable taste and artistry when compared to the impressionists: Renoir, Monet, Manet, and Lautrec, whose work set the standards for modernism in art.

Revisionism with respect to symbolist theatre was slower in coming, no doubt because the terrain was virtually unknown to the general public and the material was far less accessible. My PAJ anthology of 1985, *Doubles, Demons, and Dreamers*—reprinted as *Symbolist Drama*, a simpler, but less evocative title—was an attempt to make available the amazing range of *fin-de-siècle* playwriting in the symbolist mode. The

collection includes fourteen plays from Sweden, France, Spain, Ireland, Germany, the United States, India, Poland, and Russia and represents a rich variety of forms and styles drawing upon myth, legend, and folklore, Biblical moralities, medieval dance of death, Poesque nightmare visions, and psychic monodramas.

Already by the 1960s the impact of Artaud (an avowed admirer of Maeterlinck) and the vogue of the absurd had helped prepare the ground for the rediscovery of symbolist theatre. Beckett and Ionesco were not only inheritors of the dramatic techniques and devices of *The Intruder* and *The Blind*, but also of the grotesque vision animating Maeterlinck's work. Starting with Villiers and continuing with Maeterlinck, symbolists always had a profound awareness of the fraudulence and absurdity of so-called "real life."

Transmission of symbolist concepts of a mythopoetic theatre took place in the second half of the twentieth century through the work of playwrights such as T.S. Eliot and directors and creators like Grotowski and Kantor. The revival of poetic drama caused a reawakening of interest in mythopoesis. A proponent of symbolist poetry, T.S. Eliot returned to myth in his plays *The Family Reunion* (Orestes) and *The Cocktail Party* (Alcestis) and showed how this could be done within the confines of literary drama and drawing room settings.

Two major forces for a return to the spiritual in modern theatre are Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, Polish artists whose idiosyncratic journeys back to their pasts have become paradigms for the future. Whereas Kantor pointed to his artistic predecessors and made contact with his family and local ancestors, Grotowski wished to find a common ground with distant progenitors, stretching back to Greeks, to early Christianity, to Gnosticism, and ultimately to archaic societies and their practices.

KANTOR

A prime lesson that Kantor learned from the symbolists was the importance of "placing theatre within the realm of the totality of art." Although Kantor displayed verve and acumen in connecting his theatre to almost all the major avant-garde movements and artists of the early twentieth century, it is significant that his first work for the theatre was by Maeterlinck. Kantor started his theatrical career with a production of *The Death of Tintagiles*, a drama rendering palpable the invisible presence of death.

Kantor shared the symbolist obsession with first and last things, for entrances and exits, for genesis and eschatology. He regarded the stage as a vestibule between the worlds of the living and the dead where the departed could reappear not as ghosts, but as living beings. He created new myths out of old and old out of new. The returning soldier on his spiritual journey in *The Return of Odysseus* of Wyspiański haunted his work. A "painter of the soul," Kantor is a bridge from one age to another, from the *fin-de-siècle* circa 1900 to the turn-of-the-century circa 2000. His theatre is built on establishing contact with the other world and bringing the dead on stage as living presences.

Kantor, as master of ceremonies at a dramatic séance, creates a theatre of death where the stage is the antechamber between this world and the world beyond, allowing the dead to enter our lives, not as ghosts or unreal figures, but as tangible beings. Only the past exists, and it is irretrievable, but scraps and fragments of a lost past can momentarily be summoned forth by what Kantor calls “negatives of memory.” The artist’s discovery that life is best expressed by its absence, by vacancy, by sham, came about accidentally, as have all his most important “finds.” While vacationing on the Baltic in 1972, Kantor chanced upon an empty one-room village school house. Flattening his nose against the dirty pane of one of the windows, he peered into the past. Memory activated, time set spiraling backward, the theatre of death was born in that illusory return to the lost homeland of childhood. Looking through the window frame at the non-existent world of the past, the artist saw himself as a six-year-old sitting on the bench. Only in memory can we detect the faded lines of our genealogy and save our most personal histories from forgetting and annihilation. Bits of old roles, scraps of past events are momentarily called up from non-existence before falling back again into nothingness. On wooden benches, which he made himself, Kantor placed on stage thirteen old men and women, with their own childhood, in the form of manikins, attached to their sides and backs as emblems of mortality.

For Kantor the stage is a “poor room of the imagination,” a place of community between the living and the dead—out of time and out of space—where a profane sacrum is celebrated each evening. “But isn’t profanation the best way and perhaps the only way of keeping a ritual alive?” Kantor asks. “I maintain,” Kantor asserts, “that the theatre is a fording place on a river, a plane across which dead characters from the other shore, from the other world, cross into our world, now, into our life. And what happens then? I can give you the answer: the Dybbuk, the spirit of the dead, who enters into the body of another person and speaks through him.”

GROTOWSKI

From his youth profoundly interested in esoteric spiritual literature and magic, Grotowski—adopting the religious formulation of his model, Juliusz Osterwa, the creator of the Polish ensemble Reduta—considered theatre to be a holy communion. Throughout his career Grotowski was engaged in a visionary quest for spiritual purification. Personal transformation was the goal of the theatrical event. The actor seeks spiritual liberation through exacting discipline in the holy act of psycho-physical performance before the spectator. He referred to the theatre in religious terms as a place where sacrifice leads to redemption and sanctity. Theatre, he argued, should return to the forms of ritual from which it arose. Then the actor becomes a celebrant in a secular mystery, acting for a community of spectators who take part in the ritual and join in the collective creation.

Grotowski approaches sacred theatre through myth and archetype in a profane ritual, a modern and ironic confrontation with mythopoesis that must be tested through blasphemy and sacrilege; in an age of disbelief only infernal mockery can rekindle sparks of feeling for the divine. In *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, which combines

passages from the Bible, liturgical chants, and texts by Dostoevsky, T.S. Eliot, and Simone Weil, the Christian myth of salvation achieved through Christ's sacrifice is put to the test of blasphemy and profanation, and the myth of the hero's spiritual transformation is radically restructured.

In his paratheatrical work between 1969 and 1975, Grotowski did away with the theatre building, the actor, and the spectator in favor of the direct participation of one human being with other human beings in outdoor settings, such as forests and mountains, as part of events sometimes lasting days or even weeks, or, contrarily, in confined rooms for short periods, in order to reach the spiritual essence common to all men. Bringing together people of different nationalities, ages, professions, races, who met in different countries and settings, Grotowski strove to break down the barriers that prevent humankind from reaching what lies hidden in the soul.

Both the theatrical and the paratheatrical explorations conducted by Grotowski have been dedicated to the revelation of a secular mystery (the only kind possible in an age of disbelief), a ceremony capable of making actor and spectator one, a communal and collective creation that will transform its participants and reorder their lives.

In the words of Ludwik Flaszen, Grotowski's longtime associate and literary advisor, "Grotowski's performances wish to revive the utopia of those elementary experiences, supplied by the collective ritual, in whose ecstatic elation a community, as it were, dreamed a dream about its own essence, its place in total reality, not particularized into separate spheres, where Beauty was not different from Truth, emotions from intellect, spirit from body, joy from suffering; where man felt an affinity with the Totality of Being."

CONCLUSION

What the symbolists bequeathed to present-day theatre is a belief in the power of the creative imagination to transform first the individual, then society. They believed in the wholeness of experience, in the links between the exterior and interior, the microcosm and macrocosm, and in humankind's relation to the earth, thus anticipating present-day ecological concerns. Rejecting the official doctrines and dogmas of institutional religions and politics, the symbolists saw social change as effected through transformations of consciousness. The symbolist prepared the ground and cleared the field, making it possible for twenty-first-century playwrights to range freely back and forth in time from ancient myths to science fiction projections into future times.

DANIEL GEROULD is Lucille Lortel Distinguished Professor of Theatre and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. He has translated and written about Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. He edited the twelve-volume Harwood/Routledge *Polish and East European Theatre Archive* and is the editor of *Slavic and East European Theatre*.