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Transgression of the Self—the Total Act in Jerzy Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre and Jungian Archetype Experience

Keywords: archetype, Self, Grotowski, Jung, psychoanalysis

Słowa kluczowe: archetyp, jaźń, Grotowski, Jung, psychoanaliza

Abstract

This article will be devoted to one of Jerzy Grotowski’s most important discoveries, *the total act*, a specific kind of action and experience. It was created as part of theatrical practice, but apart from the function related to the dramaturgy of performances, it had a higher purpose, associated with the search for the essence of humanity and sources of the experience of reality. Jerzy Grotowski sought to transform actors and observers, open them to what is authentic, alive and present. This achievement was a kind of experience in which the *sacrum* and the *profanum* are overcome. The total act allowed a person “to become watched” and, paradoxically, allowed them to participate in the duality of passive action, in which a person becomes an observer and agent at the same time.

My goal is to describe the role of the principle of coexistence of opposites in the work of J. Grotowski. I am describing the total act as an opportunity to reach an experience of reality in which the mind and the body merge with each other. Humankind as a psychophysical unity precedes all differences in this experience, he or she is able to reach the very center of their own self, that which Jung called *Selbst*. According to J. Grotowski, this state is possible when the influence of myths and collective ideas is overcome.

Introduction

The Total Act in Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre is an interesting object of study, as a phenomenon, not only from the standpoint of culture studies, but also that of psychology.¹ This is undoubtedly due to Carl Gustav Jung's postulates inspiring the idea of striving towards it, as well as its theoretical basis. This article aims to describe the influence of Jung's psychoanalysis on the Total Act, and to point to the fact that it has been an experience of a psychological nature with the potential to transform on both the individual and the collective level. One ought to seek the influence on the emergence of the idea of a Total Act not only in Jung's concept, but also in peak experiences as described by Ronald Laing (Kolankiewicz, 2011), or Antonin Artaud's "cosmic trance" (Grotowski, 2012, p. 292). Inspiration has also been found in some anthropologists' works, i.e., Émile Durkheim and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who described the social and psychological functions of rituals in traditional communities and their underlying collective imaginations. Some are convinced that Grotowski tried to create a theater that would become a contemporary counterpart to archaic rituals (Kłossowicz, 2006, p. 242). He also founded the project called the "Theatre of Sources" that referred to primal ritual forms as an inspiration leading to actions that transport outside of the ordinary experience. He also spoke of a profane ritual; a vehicle of sorts that allows to meet oneself in the face of another human being in an authentic manner. However, Grotowski's projects were not directed at contact with things sacred or at finding forms that could replace a traditional ritual, and especially not in the case of the Total Act, which was an element of theater reform that preceded the Theatre of Sources. This phenomenon, of which the goal was mainly an authentic and profound meeting of two people—the actor and the spectator—can only be conceived via Jung's theory of archetypes.

Grotowski's development of his activities saw an evolution throughout the years: from theatrical work in collaboration with Ludwik Flaszen, and

¹ This research was funded in whole by the National Science Centre, Poland, Preludium 20 nr 2021/41/N/HS1/01471 *The Archetype as a Symbolic Form in the Concept of Carl Gustav Jung and in the Art-and-Research Work of Jerzy Grotowski*. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

paratheatrical activities, with the Theatre of Sources dedicated to researching ritual actions of traditional cultures, all the way to the “Art as vehicle” project devised with Mario Biaggini in Pontedera. As he himself claimed, this evolution was a natural consequence of understanding human personality as something in a perpetual process. Grotowski did not strive to figure out a method or a working scheme that would be best for the art of theater, but instead an ever more refined listening in to the self, although not the self that would be tied to the ego with its everyday needs, but a universal one, common to all humans, perhaps the essence of humanity. This is what gave rise to the vision of the Total Act—a communion of the body and the psyche, their unification in experiencing a free flow of impulses, which Grotowski called the stream of life (Kajzar, 2006, p. 253).

The Total Act from a Psychological and Anthropological Perspective

Each of the particular periods of Grotowski’s activity, as well as the direction of the evolution of his research, are interesting considering their relationship with Jung’s psychoanalysis (Brach-Czaina, 1980). Yet I will concentrate on the question of the Total Act, developed in the period of activity of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole and later the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław. Narrowing the field of research down to the time of theatrical activity is necessary; Grotowski’s aspiration for his actors to achieve a Total Act belongs to this very period, synonymous with the 1960s and early 1970s.

From a psychological and anthropological perspective, the Total Act is an interesting object of research, as a kind of human experience with the potential for self-discovery, a liminal experience, and as a counterpart to Jungian striving for the self—psychological wholeness. The non-accidental terminological relationship between the wholeness of the *psyche* and the Total Act results from a reference to wholeness, potentially achievable to humans through the integration of archetypal contents: in the first case, with the help of active imagination; and in the second, through a script created by the physical and the mental action. Grotowski was open about having been inspired by Jung’s works, which he often referred to. He especially valued *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, for describing the psychiatrist’s personal experiences with the individuation process (Jung, 1993b, pp. 390–392). One could argue that the process leading to Jungian psychological wholeness and

the Total Act of the Laboratory Theatre are two ways to achieve the same goal—to connect to the archetypal source of one's own being. Grotowski wrote of the Total Act:

If I were to express all this in one sentence I would say that it is all a question of giving oneself. One must give oneself totally, in one's deepest intimacy, with confidence, as when one gives oneself in love. Here lies the key. Self-penetration, trance, excess, the formal discipline itself—all this can be realized, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defense. This act culminates in a climax. It brings relief. None of the exercises in the various fields of the actor's training must be exercised in skill. They should develop a system of allusions which lead to the elusive and indescribable process of self-donation. (Grotowski, 2002, p. 38)

Leading to the self as the climactic element of the individuation process, as well as to the Total Act, was the confrontation with oneself. Jung and Grotowski alike spoke of the necessity to abandon the persona, that is, a mask hiding the authentic human. Striving for psychological wholeness went beyond the therapeutic aspect, and became striving for self-discovery, and perhaps even enlightenment; similarly, the Total Act did not serve simply to realize aesthetic objectives, but to expand self-awareness by referring to the collective consciousness of the spectators. The gnostic core of their views joined Jung and Grotowski; they both regarded the direct experience as a source of knowledge about oneself (Prokopiuk, 1993, p. 34). The former expressed the process of his own striving for the self symbolically, in *The Red Book*, in which he recorded those images of the fantasy which he considered to be non-accidental—mental images of archetypal motivation (Jung, 2019, pp. 43–45). He sought an analogy for the individuation process in alchemical transformations. For Jung, this process was expressed in a metaphorical manner: the transformation from *nigredo* into *albedo*, the joining of elements, represented the synthesis of opposing psychological contents; and the quest for the philosopher's stone is an image of the striving for psychological wholeness (Jung, 1970, p. 80). As for the director, the inspiration from gnosis is visible not only in his interest for gnostic myths and writings, but also in his consideration of the inner process that accompanies the Total Act, composed of known and unknown, conscious and unconscious elements—together forming a flow of live impulses

(Grotowski, 2012, p. 491). Underlying this approach to working with actors was the conviction that access to knowledge surpassing the conscious and personal aspects is possible, and its source, according to Jung and Grotowski, would be the collective unconscious's archetypes. The Total Act, just like the individuation process, would be set in an archetypal experience.

The necessary element that allowed them to come into existence was a personal confrontation with culturally set values and their symbolic forms of expression. The assumption associating Jung and Grotowski's areas of exploration was that culture is the space of expression for the collective content of a psychological nature. From the outset, the director sought the possibility of transforming certain cultural contents and their underlying convictions, attitudes and feelings on the individual and social levels, in order to eliminate obsolete ones and those that inhibit the live human experience.

The core of the theatre is an encounter. The man who makes an act of self-revelation is, so to speak, one who establishes contact with himself. That is to say, an extreme confrontation, sincere, disciplined, precise and total—not merely a confrontation with his thoughts, but one involving his whole being from his instincts and his unconscious right up to his most lucid state. (Grotowski, 2002, pp. 56–57)

According to Jolanta Brach-Czaina, Grotowski realized consciously the assumptions of Jung's individuation process, but not on the individual psyche, as Jung would have, in dialogue with a patient. He chose teamwork, acting at the community level, and interacting with the community of spectators (Brach-Czaina, 1980, p. 82). In his commentaries to the 13 Rows Theatre's performances (*Dziady*, among others), while the theatre was still based in Opole, Ludwik Flaszen wrote that their production assumed a confluence of the chorus and the audience, making them one community, an emanation of a collective psyche (Flaszen, 2006, p. 54).

Through theater, Grotowski transposed the Jungian individuation process onto the collective level. However, the individual human was not deprived of their exceptional role (Czerwiński, 2019, p. 32). What is most important and lived most intensely on the individual level belongs to the community of human experiences. The main motifs that appear in Grotowski's pieces pertained to the relationship between the individual and the collective: their mutual influence and the possibility of transformation

within culture, on this deepest of levels, which one man—a rebel, a dreamer, but also a victim and an outsider—is capable of invoking. Grotowski even described the theatrical performance as an act of transgression (Kornaś, 2006, p. 419). Underlying collective psychological experiences are archetypes. These constituted the core of former mysteries. Contemporarily, Grotowski revealed anew the possibility for reaching the archetypal through the theatrical spectacle.

Kształtując w przedstawieniu archetyp uderzamy w „podświadomość zbiorową” – następuje oddźwięk, odruch, choćby na zasadzie sprzeciwu, poczucia, że coś sprofanowano; zbliżamy do siebie dwa ensemble (zespół aktorów i zespół widzów) trochę na gruncie prowokacji, a pozornie na gruncie „magii”, „aktu magicznego”, w którym – jak w prehistorii teatru – uczestniczą właściwie wszyscy (misterium-archetyp odgrywa tutaj rolę przedmiotu misterium).² (Grotowski, 2012, pp. 212–213)

The Concept of Archetype in Grotowski's Texts

Grotowski used the Jungian term “archetype” in a lenient manner, somewhat skipping the philosophical background for Jung's theory. In particular he rejected the *a priori* character of archetypal forms, i.e., a Kantian presumption that leads one to consider the unconscious epistemologically unavailable. The director was not interested in the existence of archetypal forms outside the socio-historical dimension, that is, in the sphere of culture. He treated them as a symbolic expression of “human knowledge of oneself” (Grotowski, 2012, pp. 212–213). Grotowski's postulates were devoid of the philosophical assumptions that are present especially in the late works of Jung.

² *When shaping an archetype in a performance, we hit the ‘collective subconscious’—there is a response, an impulse, an objection perhaps, a feeling that something has been desecrated; we bring together two ensembles (a group of actors and a group of spectators), somewhat through instigation, and formally through “magic,” an “act of magic” which—just like in theatrical prehistory—involves everybody (the mystery–archetype plays the role of the object of mystery).*

According to the definitions found in Jung's works, archetypes are typical forms of representing reality, the psychological counterpart to instincts—typical forms of acting (Jung, 2011, p. 152). Initially, Jung sought the source of “primal images” (qualified later as archetypes) in the actions of the *libido* drive, mental energy, and its capacity to transform into a symbolic form that refers to the world of human experiences and values. He noticed the existence of archetypes through repetitive mythological motifs, occurring commonly in various cultures and religions—psychological content expressed in a symbolic manner. This led him to consider the symbol as an intermediary between the unconscious psyche and consciousness. According to Jung, the collective unconscious constitutes the entirety of mental phenomena occurring outside consciousness, plus instincts and the *libido* drive. He also described it as a psychoidal entity, and an archetype in itself (Rosińska, 1982, p. 38). On the one hand, it is the source of human spiritual, cultural, and scientific activity; on the other hand, it is like the forces of nature—amoral and destructive (the source of mental disorders). The unconscious might hold all of the contents with the potential for conscious realization. The conscious completes the unconscious; it is its opposite and continuation at the same time (Jung, 2007, p. 349). The psyche evolves—on the individual level through the individuation process, and on the collective level there is accumulation of consciously available contents (and expression of the unconscious ones), which is reflected in culture (Jung, 1979). At that, the archetypes cause an entire spectrum of external experiences; they are the source of mental projections requiring work on oneself. The path to psychological wholeness involves expanding one's consciousness, and identifying and integrating some of those archetypes, which are mere potencies in the unconscious. They get updated in positive or negative aspects, depending on personality and lived experience. This duality of the archetypes, their positive or negative influence, corresponds to a dualist image of the world of gnosis, based on the coexistence of opposites. Good and evil, finding symbolic counterparts in light and darkness, constitute integral parts of the structure of reality. Such views can be found in alchemy and Kabbalist treatises, i.e., *The Book of Zohar*, *Theatrum Chemicum*, *Kabbala Denudate*, *Ars Chemica*, or *Mysterium Lunae*, which Jung studied (Ribi, 1993, p. 19). The archetypes are finished and fully formed, yet retaining a kind of liveliness of interaction—proto-images, blueprints. The livelier the given archetype, the greater the impression,

awe, and even fear it evokes. The archetypal experience is accompanied by experiencing a *numinous* (Jung, 2007, p. 225)—a term derived from Rudolf Otto's religious studies that describes a psychological state related to experiencing the sacred. According to Jung, *numinosum* is a kind of ambience that can be described as either sacred or terrifying (Jung, 2007, p. 225). Pertaining to the question of archetypal experience, he also referred to the notion of *mana*—a force, a feeling of sacredness, a power, as described by Marcel Mauss (Jung, 2007, p. 405).

That which Jung designated by the name *numinosum*, Grotowski and Flaszen called *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery of horror and enchantment—a simultaneity of two opposing feelings related to the experience of the sacred (Kolankiewicz, 2006, p. 278). Both states involve living a mystery surpassing the every-day experience, surpassing man, causing awe and fear. This aspect of the Total Act is a psychological state that is specific to it.

The role of fantasy in that experience cannot be overvalued. Experiences of archetypal nature come into existence when a given otherwise unconscious content acting upon the psyche encounters a releasing impulse in the form of symbolic imagination. Indeed, archetypes are the source of symbols. They come into existence through the transformation of unconscious contents into a consciously available form. The symbol, as a carrier of contents derived from the unconscious, contents that are more than merely what is subject to intellectual analysis, also affects emotions, feelings, and the imagination—and at that, carries meaning (Pajor, 2004, p. 111). In order to reach the collective unconscious, Jung designed a method of active imagination, consisting in invoking and observing images of the fantasy—a sort of daydream. It could also occur during any sort of creative activity that involves spontaneous expression. The tool, however presented in the spirit of modern science's paradigm, belongs to an old tradition of spiritual knowledge, i.e. the Kabbala, alchemy, astrology, requiring a capacity to form and interpret symbols that enable insight into the nature of one's own, and that of God (Voss, 2009, p. 39).

Functions and Jungian Sources of the Total Act

In Grotowski's case, the actor's need to reach the depths of their own interior could be fulfilled by the Total Act. Man, as a psychophysical unity in this experience, preceded all differences, being able to reach the very center of their own Jungian Self. Thus, the team members would work on a literary work or a Bible fragment, searching during several days or weeks for their own gesture, noise, or a word in which they would be able to find a personal meaning, and at that, inspire its residing emotional charge. The Total Act should bond the individual and the universal. It was based on a structure, a script of movements, voices, words, and the internal experience all coming together. Its "totality" resided in the bonding of the actor with spontaneous movements of their body; experiencing and observing at once, so as to stay conscious of what is at work. This would serve to connect the conscious to the unconscious, while at the same time allowing for lucidity, keeping the actor from falling into trance. The structure was developed in a lengthy process and belonged to the actor as their personal creation. It was therefore a unique construction that was to be lived anew every time, despite its numerous reproductions. Since it worked by considering Man as a psychophysical unity, it included the possibility to synchronize bodily impulses with the level of mental experiences. The Total Act in itself allowed simultaneously experiencing and expressing them, but that required understanding them and according them a symbolic form. Hence there was equilibrium between the degrees of maintaining and losing control in favor of a free flow of psychophysical impulses.

We can observe the gnostic principle of the coexistence of opposites represented in Jung's concept underlying the Total Act on several of its layers: in the inner construction of the actor's actions, in the interaction with the spectator, finally in the way the plot of a performance is set. First, the actor, while developing the Total Act, had to strive to stay spontaneous, while adhering to a strictly defined voice and movement score. The actions were bipolar—precision and strictness seemingly deny spontaneity. Yet the goal was to maintain the precision of carrying out previously composed elements of the score, while never ceasing to improvise the "stream"—the sensing of the flow of life and the experiencing every time anew of one's own gestures and the feelings associated with them, despite repetitiveness (Grotowski, 2012, p. 491). Grotowski maintained that it was a way to impact

the conscious mind, which responds to precise action, and the unconscious mind, associated with spontaneous, truly creative process. This constructional layer of the Total Act directly affected the actor; another affected the spectator, i.e., the polyphony of their actions—a gesture might contradict a facial expression, or a grimace of horror might accompany the rest of the body dazzling with ecstasy (Osiński, 2006, p. 322). This duality extended onto the whole structure of the performance. Ludwik Flaszen qualified it as a “dialectic of derision and apotheosis,” through which the actor were to be humiliated and exalted at once, and tragedy to transform into grotesque.

Dialektyka ośmieszenia i apoteozy” „uderzając” w archetyp, wprawia w drganie cały łańcuch tabu, konwencji i wartości uświęconych. W ten sposób kształtuje się migotliwość przedstawienia: korowód profanacji, kolejne stadia (czy też płaszczyzny) sprzeczności, kolejne i wzajemne antytezy, kolejne unicestwienie tabu...³ (Grotowski, 2012, p. 223)

This polyphony also allowed connecting tradition to modernity, embedding universal phenomena in forms of present events in a way as to allow the spectator to fully identify with them. One example is setting *The Great Improvisation*⁴ in a concentration camp in the play *Akropolis*. Besides that, Grotowski often juxtaposed classicistic motifs with animalistic impulses, combining the sacred and the profane (Kajzar, 2006, p. 253). The body had a major role in the Total Act. Grotowski wanted the spectator to be able to encounter the actor’s bodily and mental unity, “such as one is—whole” (Grotowski, 2012, p. 502). For him, the actor’s body had to be somewhat subject to the inner processes occurring within them in such a way that the internal impulse and its external expression come simultaneously (Grotowski, 2007, p. 37). The Total Act was based in lifting the dualistic tradition opposing spirituality and corporeality (Osiński, 1989, p. 278), which also characterizes Jung’s psychology. The collective unconscious means that it is difficult

³ “The “dialectic of derision and apotheosis,” by “striking” the archetype, sets an entire string of taboos, conventions and sacred values into vibration. In this way, the lamen- bency of the spectacle is formed: a parade of profanity, further stages (or planes) of contradiction, further and mutual antitheses, one more annihilation of a taboo...”

⁴ Famed monologue in Adam Mickiewicz’s play *Dziady* (Forefathers’ Eve), in which the protagonist, a Polish patriot imprisoned by tsarists, challenges God’s indifference to his nation’s suffering and likens his poetry to divine works of creation.

to unequivocally draw a line between the bodily and the spiritual—both archetypes and instincts belong to it.

The Symbol in Jung's psychoanalysis and Grotowski's works

The objective of Grotowski's work during the theatrical period was to challenge mythical heroes, values fixed especially in Christian myths, in order to verify whether this mythical image can be saved—whether it can survive the trial that was being appraised in the audience's mental collective (Wójtowicz, 2006, p. 338). Referring to the unconscious part of the collective psyche required operating with symbols. The Total Act was itself built on the basis of symbols—a mixture of movement, words, and emotions. The Symbol, a carrier of unconscious contents, fulfils a crucial role from the perspective of Jung's analytic psychology and that of Grotowski's art. Jung considered the symbol as an intermediary between the conscious and the unconscious. It allows the perception of messages from the unconscious, which is not knowable in itself. Moreover, the symbol constitutes a sort of visualization or imagination of that which it is surpassed by, because it provides in synthesized form what consciousness fills with content, while exuding a sort of undisclosed sense which completes it (Barentsen, 2015, p. 67–79).

Jung devoted most of his work to the symbolism associated with the archetype of the Self, being the most important of all archetypes, at the same time the center of the human psyche and the objective of the individuation process, joining the conscious and the unconscious. The Self surpasses the personal sphere of the psyche; on the other hand, it is symbolized by unity, wholeness, by integrating every opposite. Its symbols include images of the fantasy, i.e., the mandala, as well as solar, and especially heroic, deities (Jung, 1993a, p. 113). One of the most important symbols of the Self in our cultural sphere is the figure of the Christ, a resurrected, truly transformed man. This figure materializes the heroic myth, described by Rudolf Otto as the most important for many cultures (Otto, 2004). The Christ, a hero of divine origin, having come from miraculous conception, having overcome many trials, having become an outsider, having been shunned by his perpetrators, ultimately beats death. Jung interpreted the myth of the Christ as an image of mental transformation. He is, as a man and as God,

an image of wholeness (Kuźmicki, 2008, p. 65). The figure of the hero is a symbol of the process of deepening self-awareness and striving for the Self. It required sacrifice, confrontation with the archetypal, with oneself, and later also with the supra-personal. It leads at times to the collision with social collectiveness and received values.

Messianic themes pertaining to the heroic sacrifice of the individual on the altar of collective life were ever-present in Grotowski's most important spectacles, i.e., *Dziady*, *Akropolis*, *Książę Niezłomny* (*The Constant Prince*), and *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris*. The Constant Prince's character—the anointed one, or the apocryphal figure of The Dark One—the savior, were the most important acting performances of the Laboratory Theatre. The Total Act itself was considered an act of sacrifice. The savior was dishonored, profaned, or depicted in a grotesque manner on the stage in order to discover a live and still valid meaning of that image, in line with the dialectic of derision and apotheosis. The spectator was to discover anew their presence in themselves (Kolak, 2016, pp. 176–178). The figure of Christ in *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* is a multi-faceted image of a village fool and an enlightened man, utterly profaned, while the resolution of the spectacle can be understood as its final rejection. This kind of narration can act like a myth: cause contradicting feelings, like the fascinating yet horrifying sacred. Grotowski's stage productions fit into the concept of Jung's myth of the hero—an individual opposed to the collective, symbolizing the conscious in confrontation with the unconscious.

Summary

Jerzy Grotowski's achievements were an extension of Jung's psychoanalytical work; however, they introduced a novelty. A process beginning with working on the body rather than the psyche, subordinating it to internal impulses, was to lead to the experience of wholeness. It was paradoxically a way of "putting the body to death," making it entirely subject to those purely vital impulses preceding the separation of body and mind, setting as one as the other into movement. Moreover, the Total Act came into existence not only as a novel method of realizing the individuation process—it is set on the limit of different domains: the theatrical art, a secular ritual, psychology, and anthropology.

After some years of trials, the Total Act was achieved in 1965 by Ryszard Cieślak in *Książę Niezłomny*—not once, but with each consecutive performance. It may seem surprising; how does a living experience such as the Total Act get repeated and experienced each time with equal intensity, if it means repeating the same script of words and movements? It can be said that Grotowski's goal was for an actor to develop a technique of experiencing, of remaining present as the creator and observer of one's own actions each time anew. This time, a given script was in fact irreproducible and different each time, despite its fixed structure which gave the frame for the performance. A collective realization of the Total Act took place in *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris*, performed from 1969–1980. This last play to ever be produced by the Laboratory Theatre was considered by Grotowski to be the peak achievement within this branch of the arts. He then gave up his theatrical work to concentrate on experimental performative actions, in which the spectator as a passive observer ceased to be necessary—no longer a witness, they became a participant in the events. The psychoanalytical works of Carl Gustav Jung certainly influenced the methods developed by Jerzy Grotowski over the many years of his creative work. The total act is an interesting example of applying the achievements of psychoanalysis to a non-therapeutic field.

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Citation

Neumann, P. (2023). Transgression of the Self—the Total Act in Jerzy Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre and Jungian archetype experience. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, 62 (2), 147–162. DOI: 10.18276/aie.2023.62-08.