

Re-Membering The Mountain: Grotowski's Deep Ecology¹

Theresa J. May

To return things to themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge [...] to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is (Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1962: x)

A cascade of images hit me like warm rain when I heard that Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski had died of leukaemia on 14 January 1999. A water pump at the edge of a pasture, wild blueberries, flames illuminating faces, a brass key, spires of a castle against grey sky, blisters. In 1977 I participated in the *Mountain Project* at the Teatr Laboratorium in Wrocław, Poland. The countryside outside the city provided a sensuous container for a journey that was personal and communal, material and metaphoric. Walking day and at night, sometimes in pouring rain, participants were lead on a silent trek through fields and forests; then up a mountain to Grodziec castle. The 'work' continued in and around the castle: night walks, running in the forest, improvised movement, silent vigils. Each exercise was designed to interrupt self-conscious, everyday behaviour and thus provoke unmediated, 'direct' experience of the world.

Like the Laboratory's other paratheatrical experiments (1970–78), which shifted the company's emphasis from public performance to participatory experiences, the *Mountain Project* resisted analysis, defied observation, privileged exploration and process, and produced no discrete artistic product.² In 1978 Grotowski himself quashed all attempts to theorize about paratheatre, saying, 'when there is no division between actor and spectator, when every participant of the process is a person who is doing, then a description ostensibly from

the outside, [...] one that tries to grasp what is happening and why, [...] can only lead to misunderstandings [...] Only a description “from within” is possible here’ (Kumiega 1985: 86). Consequently, all discussion about what the paratheatrical experiments were meant to achieve and whether or not the work was ‘successful’ became suspect. Yet to omit the paratheatrical projects of the Polish Theatre Lab from scrutiny and analysis is also to abandon what they can, through reflection, continue to teach us.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram has illuminated the common ground between the central concerns of phenomenology – embodiment, subjectivity, perception – with those of deep ecology – intersubjectivity, the ecological self, reverence. Functioning as a meditation on what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s calls ‘the world which preceded knowledge’, the Mountain’s lessons can be summed up as practised reciprocity (Abram 1996: 36). Participants encountered themselves as community; individuality became intersubjectivity; self became permeable; forest, field and stone halls leapt into an animated sensorial encounter.

The *Mountain Project* had three phases, of which I participated in the final two: *The Way* involving encounters with the countryside, climbing the mountain; and *Mountain of Flame*, the culminating arrival, contemplative enclosure, and cycles of work and rest at Grodziec castle.³ The Project was designed to produce ‘disarmament’, described by Jennifer Kumiega as a ‘form of deconditioning of the individual response – to the environment, and to other participants [...] to react to something in a manner not conditioned by past experience or future conjecture – in other words to be fully in the present and fully spontaneous’. After disarmament, Grotowski argued, a person unencumbered by cultural codes and taboos would be in an ‘original state’ of being, ‘close to forces of nature’ (Kumiega 1985: 95). His claim is not far from deep ecology’s credo of ‘thinking like a mountain’. Through physical endurance, perceptual disorientation, monastic silence, contemplation and communality, the *Mountain Project* attempted to recover an unself-conscious human being whose impulses would be as free as those of any wild creature.

Is it possible to assess the efficacy of such a project? I unearthed the journal I had kept during my participation for clues. There I confront a first-person, present tense account that would seem to approach the 'within' to which Grotowski alludes. Using language to illuminate so-called direct experience, however, is inevitably problematic. Corporeal knowledge degrades when transmuted into discursive practice; experience is uprooted in the act of writing it down. Self-reflexive, folding back on itself, the journal demonstrates that the experience on the Mountain was greatly informed by an already lively discourse in which the participant herself was immersed and invested, rendering 'authentic' experience inaccessible. This entrapment in the realm of discourse (*vs.* experience) is precisely what Grotowski had warned against.

In the years since the *Mountain Project*, poststructuralists have argued convincingly that all experience is constructed like a text. What Kumiega valorises as 'reality' is so mediated by social discourse that it may be impossible to distinguish between experience and its transcription. The journal is shot through with expectation informed by the proliferating discourse about the 'Polish experiment' such that we must wonder if my Mountain experience was merely a *product of* that discourse. Before my journey to Poland, I made the following entry in Chicago, waiting for a visa:

I go to Poland to walk through the dark corridors with a candle, to read the inscriptions on the walls, to feel my way like a blind woman, to find that which is ancient in me [...] to clear away the mud in my voice, to find the source of my dancing and what prevents me from dancing (May 1999: 3).

Clearly I had already internalized the stories and transcriptions of others even before my journey. An entry made upon leaving the castle to descend the mountain is consistent:

[t]his whole thing was like a Jungian dream: plunging through different terrain like the terrain of the mind, blundering in pain through the darkness towards something unknown, always the feeling that you are

going in circles. Then through the blackness you find an innermost sanctuary, an ancient place in yourself (*ibid.*: 15).

Grotowski may have been right: perhaps it is best to leave it alone. So-called direct experience may be a mirage, a wishful subject casting her own reflection onto the land ahead. The journal's discursive entrapment raises the larger question, however, which has divided those who, with Grotowski, believe in direct (authentic/spontaneous) experience and those convinced that experience is constructed within a linguistically informed reality and inseparable from it. Materialist criticism has further unhinged the self-presencing subject by observing that experience depends on cultural, political and economic influences, and is a function of social conditions as much as a response to them. Missing from this familiar litany of material factors, however, is perhaps the most material of all: the ecological. Stanton B. Garner, Jr. has noted that 'poststructuralist criticism [possesses] an attitude symptomatic [...] of a deeper uneasiness with the body [...] as a site of corporeal and subjective elements that always resist reduction to the merely textual' (1993: 448). Even as we are compelled to construe 'subject positions' within a linguistic 'landscape', those very constructions arise from the subject's ecological embeddedness in actual land. Experience tainted by discourse, or for that matter sired by it, is not without sensorial/perceptual immediacy. That the boundary between the embodied/perceptual world and the conceptual/socially constructed one is blurred does not justify subsuming the embodied within the discursive, sanitising and erasing the material/ecological situatedness of experience. On the contrary, this interconnectivity must re-establish the embodied world – what Husserl called the 'life world' (Abram 1996: 40–44) – as the ground from which representations and discourse arise. The phenomenological world, while it may not be discrete, is not so easily dismissed precisely because it re-positions and re-vitalizes the ecological/embodied subject at the site of experience.

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes an 'organism of words', arguing that language itself is immersed in and a function of embodiment (1962: 213). As the body finds balance in dynamically unfolding space, speech (written or oral) is also a product of engagement that 'does not

translate ready made thought, but *accomplishes* it' (*ibid.*: 207, emphasis added). Meaning-making is embodied action. Language thus construed is not a means but a manifestation that bespeaks an intimate link with the world and one another (*ibid.*: 228). In this light, the journal is a 'sensing organ' and as corporally a part of my Mountain experience as mud on my boots, filled with utterances that 'give voice to the world from our experience situation *within* it' – a situatedness that *includes* but cannot be reduced to discourse (Abram 1996: 47). A shard of the experience, like the narrative of a lucid dream, stained with mud and tea, still smelling of Polish cheese, the journal's limitations as a document (that it emerges from a subject position) are its strength as a window into the phenomenological fields and deep ecological workings of the *Mountain Project*.

Deep ecology is the only branch of environmental thought that takes the phenomenological reciprocity inherent in the human relationship with the natural world as its point of departure. Ecofeminists have critiqued deep ecology for its patriarchal (white/Western) essentialism, claiming that its call for 'root' cultural change in response to the environmental crisis is born of economic power and privilege. Garner's defence of phenomenology in the face of poststructuralism applies here. Such criticism runs the risk of fixing deep ecology at its historical inception, 'in its opening, most preliminary articulations, robbing it of its developments and internal revisions – in short, of its historical contingency, its literal status as a "movement"' (Garner 1993: 445). Moreover, calling as it does for a transvaluation and transformation in those cultures (Euro-American) whose consumptive patterns and Enlightenment values have precipitated the world-wide environmental crisis, deep ecology targets that self-same nexus of power. A practice as well as a philosophical inquiry, deep ecology advocates lifestyle changes and political actions in the hope of producing a cultural shift on a grand scale. The movement encourages individuals to take responsibility for environmental degradation, questions the values that drive consumption, exposes the master narratives that perpetuate a sense of human identity separate from nature, and cultivates reverence for the world. Seeking to stimulate Merleau-Ponty's 'world returned

to itself, the *Mountain Project*, as I argue below, functioned as *applied* deep ecology.

Perception, Intersubjectivity and the Ecological Self

Grotowski conceived of the theatre as a kind of communion between actor and audience (Schechner 1997: 48–53). The reciprocity at the core of Grotowski's theatrical inquiry led the Laboratory toward increasing levels of intimacy and selflessness until actor, spectator and performance disappeared altogether. Deep ecologists similarly posit a world not of observer and observed, but of interdependent, mutually responsive connectivity, a 'mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both perceiver and perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity' (Abram 1996: 66). Identity and self are fluid, not so much locations as reciprocations. 'When we attend to our experience not as intangible minds but as sounding, speaking bodies, we begin to sense that we are heard, even listened to by the numerous other bodies that surround us [...] We find ourselves alive in a listening, speaking world' (*ibid.*: 1996: 86). Paratheatrical work actively engaged the phenomenology of the embodied self, awakening participants to this intersubjective world.

Perception is a function of movement within a sensorial environment, a sensing matrix adapted to constant spatial change (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 225–347). As material site of our intersection with the more-than-human world, the body is 'a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in others, in the encompassing world' (Abram 1996: 62). In a dance with the sensible world, it negotiates space – one hand, then the other, one foot then the other, reaching for purchase; one image, then another, leaping ahead of us, adjusting depth of field. We live in a voracious embrace with the world. In this 'consanguine world' bodies are permeable fleshy receptors, the environment sensuously alive, and imagination is part of our ecological relatedness (*ibid.*: 66).

The immediate rhythms and textures of *The Way* formed a perceptual dialogue between the land and the body. The countryside took

on presence, no longer the ‘ambient’ environment, but an animated other. Walking, we inscribed the land; simultaneously the land spoke back, imprinting us. Steep furrows pressed up through burning thighs; the cool rush of berries rewarded dry lips. These corporeal connections became places-in-mind, at once markers on an imaginative and material terrain. We ‘read’ the forest and farmland with our feet and muscles; a ‘sense of place’ was palpable as we stumbled over difficult terrain or groped our way at night. Released into the rhythm of only moving, encountering a speaking land, the analytical mind lets go:

[w]e press on into the night [...] I walk close, trying to guess his next move [...] I follow the small patch of white that glows faintly on his pack. This is wonderful! I can recognize with my feet the different terrain we walked over during the day. I feel my way. Now those deep furrows, now the groves of white-barked trees, now dense and spiny wood (May 1999: 11).

Movement-based work continued in and around the castle:

bodies beating out rhythms, bodies rebounding, chasing, heaving [...] no words, only bodies moving together, in opposition, in rhythm, in awkwardness, without structure [...] like animals stalking, crawling, running, jumping, rolling [...] I do this for the sake of participation (*ibid.*: 16).

Exercises in the forest produced a sense of euphoric communion with the surrounding land, as participants ran through woods at night, full throttle over rough terrain. By pushing the participant beyond her comfort zone, exercises reawakened the senses, and the body became a tasting, touching, listening, feeling, seeing site of exchange, a subject among subjects. Similarly, landscape was transformed into land, viewscape into a ‘field of intelligence in which our actions participate’ (Abram 1996: 260). In this way the Project nurtured what Arne Naess has called the ‘ecological self’ – that is, a sense of identity that does not end with the boundary of one’s flesh, but continues on into the surrounding living flesh of the world, a self that is a process of reciprocity with and in the natural world (1988: 20).

From *Via Negativa* to *Via Positiva*

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Grotowski's work is his notion of *via negativa* in which the actor undergoes a 'process of elimination', a stripping away of layers of social masking, obligation and self-protection (Grotowski 1968: 133). Kumiega notes that the *via negativa* constituted the central 'technique' of *The Way*, providing as it did a 'hostile' encounter with the sensorial world (1997: 39–40). Within its logic freedom lay on the other side of considerations about appropriate behaviour, even on the other side of safety:

[w]alking in the night I am whacked in the face many times by the low branches. I trip. I fall. My legs are burning. I lose sight of the patch of white on the guide's pack. Instead, I follow the sound of his crunching. Suddenly I am stabbed in the eye by a branch. Bright colours, pain [...] I fall repeatedly. I want to beat the woods with my fists, to kill the branches that hurt me, to kill the man that leads us in circles through these god-awful woods at night (May 1999: 12)!

Presumably, transformation would come when the participant failed the test of *The Way* and her outer personae crumbled:

[a]gain we pierce the thickets. My eye bleeds. I am caught in the brush. I cry aloud. I have broken the silence. A Polish girl comes to me saying, '*shestra*',⁴ and takes me to the leader who says, 'in this place we will sleep'. I sit by my pack and pick out twigs that have fallen down the back of my shirt. I cry because I am afraid and ashamed – I was the first to break (*ibid.*: 12).

Consistent with Kumiega's description of *The Way* as a stream of 'skin-ripping electric neck snapping sensations of pain which catapult without warning against the flesh' (1997: 40), the *via negativa* burned away the need to 'do this right', revealing calculated determination:

[i]n the thick woods we crack and crunch, walking with hands outstretched to break through the dense branches. It is getting dark [...] I worry about running out of water and walking in the woods again at night. Will I survive? I decide to walk with my hands in front of my face [...] I will stop trying to make a success of things and just survive (May 1999: 13).

By the next night, the journal suggests, the participant has given up, given in, and consequently has more empathy for the group, aware that her experience is shared with others. From time to time a participant got lost in the darkness:

[a]fter sitting for hours my feet feel like they are frozen. When darkness falls the leader gathers us. We sit together for a while and then we walk. I walk directly behind him, determined no to loose him. I had the distinct sense that he knew my fear, knew everyone's fear [...] We seem to be going up a steep mountainside. I can feel the fear in people. We stop, sit, and gather our insides, then go on. Up, up, through a lush dark green hell [...] The incline gets steeper. Nettles sting my hands as I try to grab hold of something, anything. We stop. Someone is lost. We gather around the leader and listen to the person crunching about below. The leader claps his hands. The crunching redirects. He claps again. When the person is with us once more we walk on (*ibid.*: 13–14).

Stumbling through the woods I found myself wondering if spontaneous, authentic being demands a process as gruelling as *The Way*. Is survival mode any more authentic than struggling to keep up appearances? Moreover, the *via negativa* may even cause the sensory field to shut down ('just get through this' and 'I'll walk with my hands in front of my face'). Are we not as often disarmed by a humming bird suddenly at our window, a child's point-blank question, the unanticipated generosity of a stranger?

In *Original Blessing* (1983) theologian Mathew Fox has introduced the notion of *via positiva*. Observing the uncontainable spilling forth of life's luscious, nuance-filled, endless patterning, Fox posits the human capacity for celebration and sensual reverie as a viable pathway of awakening. Where Grotowski strips away to get at the core through an almost punitive asceticism, Fox revels in the blessings of indefatigable creation. Furthermore, if 'authentic' experience could be located through the exercises on the Mountain, the question arises: authentic by whose standard? Who will judge? Meanings proliferate. The imagination runs riot. Stories happen. Perception necessarily weaves a tapestry of narrativity we call experience, identity, self. Searching for essence is always an arrogant and ultimately failed prospect.

While *The Way* exercised a fierce surmounting of ‘tests’, *Mountain of Flame*, in the manner of *via positiva*, drew us in like an embrace:

[a] large black shape looms at the crest of the hill [...] We break into a small path, suddenly standing before a round gate in a stone wall. The leader opens it with a long brass key. We walk into a sanctuary – the courtyard of a mammoth castle standing silently against night sky, upper walls and spires silhouetted against stars. A few windows glow with yellow light. Silence. We walk up stone steps into the castle. A vestibule. Candles light the walls. We follow the example of our leader and lay our packs down. The castle doors opened into a big belly-like room [...] We take off our shoes, then walk through the huge room lit by candles where others sit, stare, rock, breathe around a wooden floor. At the far end of the room open doors reveal another room with a blazing fire. We walk towards the fire and are welcomed by others who give us blankets and hot tea. In time, food is brought out – plates of cucumber, tomato, bread, cheese, jam and sausages. In silence, care was given and accepted (May 1999: 14).

Grotowski’s work addressed itself to the ‘disappearance of the sacred and of its ritual function in the theatre’, and on the Mountain, ‘sacred’ was located in relationship (Grotowski 1968: 49). The *Mountain Project* produced profound intimacy with the sensorial world, among people and between people and place. All its actions occurred with rarefied reverence, subtly dissolving binaries of human/nature, self/other, body/space.

Reverence and Meaning-making

Dolores LaChapelle posits a deep ecological *practice* in which ritual – a distillation through action of shared story – informs perception and thus shapes values and behaviours, reinforcing a reverent regard for the world (1985: 247–240). Reverence is a product of a consciously experienced and acknowledged reciprocity, a creative act of the ecological imagination. From my first meeting with director Jacek Zmyslowski, through the preparation and the journey, the Project asked each participant to engage with food, environment and fellow pilgrims with

reverence. On the day that my participation began, I waited in one of several dimly lit rooms on the second floor of the Teatr Laboratorium and kept the following account:

[i]t is all a ritual [...] Dim lights, many blankets on the floor, people taking naps, others whispering, waiting. The rooms all look like someone almost lives in them [...] There is a hot plate with a blue kettle, a row of mugs and two plates, a bowl of sugar, tea. The leader, like a priest, has collected most of the money [...] He motions for me to follow him out into the bright daylight of the 'real' world and the bustling market. We buy several loaves of bread. I tie my sweater into a kind of nap sack to carry the bread. We buy tea and lemon, and then bring our purchases back to the room. We place the food in the middle of the floor, like an offering. Others present butter and cheese. The priest divides this up – the ritual of the plastic bags. The food looks very symbolic and sacrificial, sitting there on the floor in the golden light with all of us sitting silently in a circle around it. It is beautiful. Hunks of round hard brown bread, hunks of yellow cheese, round pointed lemons. We sit. We stare at the food. We wait. I wonder what the others are thinking. I wonder if they are afraid, if they think about the rain, if they think about the bread and the cheese. Water boiling in the kettle sends up a plume of steam, like incense (May 1999: 9–10).

The ironic reference to a 'ritual of the plastic bags' seems to reveal a self-conscious discomfort. Singularly focused on the tasks at hand, leaders worked in silence. Their reverent, un-embellished action contrasted sharply to the giddy effusiveness of social encounters to which I was accustomed. But reverence is a function of embodied intersubjectivity and as such presences the body of community, 'the circle of faces':

[a] roaring fire, a ceremonial meal, a sacred silence, and the circle of faces [...] Someone smokes, someone pours tea, someone rocks; two whisper, another sleeps. One exposes his face to light a cigarette. Bread is passed. Most of my group falls asleep quickly. I watch the fire, the food, the hands reaching for the food. Always the faces. Shrouded in shadow, exposed momentarily by leaping flames (*ibid.*: 15).

Cultivating reverence may be one of the most important personal acts forwarding cultural change. Yet our commercially bom-

barded lives allow little opportunity to exercise a careful regard for people or place. Theatre has the potential to become a place apart where actors and audience participate in an encounter that gives us pause.

Toward the Materiality of Metaphor

Modern theatre has placed metaphor at its aesthetic and narrative centre. Consequently, as Una Chaudhuri has observed, images of the natural world on stage – tree, river, fen, or wild duck – are easily dismissed as mere metaphor. This representationalism robs the natural world of its subjectivity and denies the intersubjectivity of human and non-human nature. Chaudhuri notes that theatre artists moving ‘toward an ecological theatre’ have employed strategies that ‘reliteralise’ the ecological world (1994: 27). In the face of metaphoric reductionism, Grotowski repeatedly insisted that the paratheatrical projects ‘are not metaphors’ but ‘tangible and practical’. Kumiega claims that critics who read metaphor into paratheatrical experiences are ‘guilty of ‘intellectual evasion’ and using ‘artistic criteria’ to ‘ward off [...] direct experience’ (1985: 85).⁵ The *Mountain Project* was a bold reliteralisation that placed the flesh of the world at its centre.

Marginalising metaphor and privileging material signification, however, belies the way in which the sensual world and the human imagination interface. It is time to recuperate metaphor as a function of our material and sensorial embodiedness, the language of our ecological imaginations. Playing out the consequence of this mutuality, the *Mountain Project* functioned metaphorically even as it swelled up underfoot. Grotowski himself, stressing the ‘reality’ of the Mountain, could not escape its metaphor. ‘The Mountain is something we aim towards, something which demands effort and determination. It is a kind of knot, or central point, a point of concentration [...] If there are places on earth where something beats like a pulse, or a heart, then one of these terrestrial pulse-spots would be the Mountain’ (in Kumiega 1985: 87). The Mountain demonstrated that metaphoric

meaning is an expression of our ecological intimacy with the spatial-temporal world. Experiences that cultivate such intimacy are at the heart of applied deep ecology and point toward what Chaudhuri has called 'ecological theater' (1994: 24).

Grotowski's work blew like a firestorm through Western theatre of the late twentieth century, forcing a re-examination of methods and principles, leaving a legacy that spans artistic and geographic borders. The Laboratory Theatre precipitated experiments in environmental theatre, audience participation, site-specific theatre, and actor training; its paratheatrical experiments spawned vision quests and ritual theatre. Allen Kuharski observes that the significance of Grotowski's contribution may come only in the wake of his presence, but warns us that if Grotowski's work is 'discussed and passed on within an isolated and artificial utopian/Arcadian space removed from any messy specifics of history, culture, and politics, [his] groundbreaking theory and practice are doomed to extinction'. Grotowski's work, he argues, must be explored within its 'specific material, cultural, and political circumstances' (1999: 14). Yet his influence on practitioners around the world demonstrates that Grotowski spills over his Polish-ness, his Catholic-ness, and his post-war/Cold War embedded-ness. Analysis must also follow the streams of Grotowski's watershed to far shores, where it has nourished unlikely growth, permeated and forever changed imaginative soils. Theorising influence must nevertheless proceed with caution. The purpose of the *Mountain Project* was specific. Even as others experiment with similar forms, their intentions, like Grotowski's, derive from their own historical moment.⁶

The *Mountain Project* attempted to bend and reshape an old mythos, reconstructing audience as participant much in the same way that deep ecology begs for reconstituting human beings as members of ecological communities. If we are to win the sea changes in Western society that are needed to secure the survival of peoples, species and ecosystems, then deep ecology must be an imaginative endeavour as well as a philosophical inquiry. 'Ecological victory', writes Una Chaudhuri, 'will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present, and in that the arts and humanities –

including theater – must participate’ (1994: 24). The *Mountain Project* demonstrated how theatre might assist in the transformation of an unsustainable mindset, opening the floodgates for the transvaluation to which Chaudhuri alludes.

Notes

- 1 My heartfelt thanks to the editor, Nigel Stewart, for his insightful comments during this writing.
- 2 See Kumiega (1985: 161–82) regarding the Holiday and University of Research paratheatrical projects.
- 3 See Kumiega (1985: 188) for a description of the initial phase, Night Vigil.
- 4 ‘Sister’ in Polish.
- 5 See, for example, Kumiega’s admonishment of Margaret Croyden’s metaphoric interpretation of *Special Project* (Kumiega 1994: 185).
- 6 Led by Thomas Richards and Mario Biagani, research continues at the Grotowski Workcentre in Pontedera, Italy. See Schechner (1997: xxv–xxviii) for a discussion of Grotowski’s influence and legacy.

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