

# Peter Brook and Traditional Thought\*

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## Theatre and Tradition

The continuous investigation of the meaning of theatre, which underpins all of Peter Brook's work, has inevitably led him to an investigation of Tradition. If theatre springs from life, then life itself must be questioned. Understanding theatrical reality also entails understanding the agents of that reality, the participants in any theatrical event: actors, director, spectators. For a man who rejects all dogma and closed systems of thought, Tradition offers the ideal characteristic of unity in contradiction. Although it asserts its immutable nature, nevertheless it appears in forms of an immense heterogeneity: while devoting itself to the understanding of unity, it does so by focusing its concerns on the infinite diversity of reality. Finally, Tradition conceives of understanding as being something originally engendered by experience, beyond all explanation and theoretical generalisation. Isn't the theatrical event itself 'experience,' above all else?

Even on the most superficial of levels, Brook's interest in Tradition is self-evident: one thinks of his theatre adaptation of one of the jewels of Sufi art, Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, of his film taken from Gurdjieff's book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, and of the subsequent work on *The Mahabharata*. Clearly an investigation of the points of convergence between Brook's theatre work and traditional thought is not devoid of purpose.

An important point needs to be made at the very outset: the word 'tradition' (from the Latin 'tradere,' meaning 'to restore,' 'to transmit') carries within it a contradiction charged with repercussions. In its primary familiar usage, the word 'tradition' signifies 'a way of thinking

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or acting inherited from the past'<sup>1</sup>: it is therefore linked with the words 'custom' and 'habit.' In this sense, one might refer to 'academic tradition,' to a 'Comédie Française tradition' or to 'Shakespearean tradition.' In theatre, tradition represents an attempt at *mummification*, the preservation of external forms at all costs—inevitably concealing a corpse within, for any vital correspondence with the present moment is entirely absent. Therefore, according to this first use of 'tradition,' Brook's theatre work seems to be anti-traditional, or, to be more precise, *a-traditional*. Brook himself has said:

Even if it's ancient, by its very nature theatre is always an art of modernity. A phoenix that has to be constantly brought back to life. Because the image that communicates in the world in which we live, the right effect which creates a direct link between performance and audience, dies very quickly. In five years a production is out of date. So we must entirely abandon any notion of theatrical tradition...<sup>2</sup>

A second, less familiar meaning of 'Tradition'—and one that will be used throughout this essay—is 'a set of doctrines and religious or moral practices, transmitted from century to century, originally by word of mouth or by example' or 'a body of more or less legendary information, related to the past, primarily transmitted orally from generation to generation.'<sup>3</sup> According to this definition, 'Tradition' encapsulates different 'traditions'—Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Sufi etc. (To avoid any confusion between these two accepted uses of the same word, a capital letter will be employed throughout when referring to this latter use).

So in essence Tradition is concerned with the transmission of a body of knowledge on the spiritual evolution of man, his position in different 'worlds,' his relationship with different 'cosmoses.' This body of knowledge is therefore *unvarying*, stable, permanent, despite the multiplicity of forms assumed in its transmission, and despite those distortions brought about by history and the passage of time. Although its transmission is usually oral, Tradition can also be conveyed by means of the science of symbols, by various writings and works of art, as well as by myths and rituals.

Traditional knowledge was established in ancient times, but it would be futile to look for a 'source' of Tradition. As far as its deepest roots are concerned, Tradition could be conceived to be outside both space (geographical) and time (historical). It is eternally present, here and now, in every human being, a constant and vital wellspring. The 'source' of Tradition can only be metaphysical. By addressing itself to what is essential in mankind, Tradition remains

very much alive in our times. The work of René Guénon or Mircea Eliade have shown the extent to which traditional thought can be of burning interest for our own era. In addition, increasingly detailed studies demonstrate the points of convergence in structural terms between contemporary science and Tradition.

One can find a precise point of contact between Tradition and theatre in Tradition's quality of vital immediacy—a quality reflected in its oral transmission, in its constant reference to the present moment and to experience in the present moment. Brook himself refers to just this, more or less directly, when he writes:

Theatre exists in the here and now. It is what happens at that precise moment when you perform, that moment at which the world of the actors and the world of the audience meet. A society in miniature, a microcosm brought together every evening within a space. Theatre's role is to give this microcosm a burning and fleeting taste of another world, and thereby interest it, transform it, integrate it.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, according to Brook's vision, although the theatre is on the one hand by its very nature 'a-traditional,' it could be conceived to be a *field of study* in which to confront and explore Tradition. The reasons for Brook's interest in the thought of Gurdjieff are also apparent: as we know, Brook devoted several years of work to realising a film version of one of his books. We believe that significant correspondences exist between Brook's work in theatre and the teachings of Gurdjieff: and for that reason Gurdjieff's name will recur throughout this essay.

While resolutely remaining a man of Tradition, Gurdjieff (1877–1949) managed to express his teachings in contemporary language. He also succeeded in locating and formulating, in a scientific manner, *laws* common to all levels of reality. These laws assure a 'unity in diversity,'<sup>5</sup> a unity beyond the infinite variety of forms associated with the different levels. These laws explain why mankind need not be a fragmented state in a thousand realities, but in one multi-faceted reality only.

Aesthetic reality, spiritual reality, scientific reality: don't they all converge on one and the same centre, while remaining utterly distinct and different in themselves? Hasn't contemporary scientific thought itself (both quantum and sub-quantum) uncovered

paradoxical and surprising aspects in nature, formerly entirely unsuspected—aspects which bring it significantly closer to Tradition?<sup>6</sup>

Theatre work, traditional thought, scientific thought: such a meeting is perhaps unusual, but certainly not fortuitous. By Peter Brook's own admission, what attracted him to theatrical form as well as to the study of Tradition was precisely this apparent contradiction between art and science. So it is not at all surprising that a book such as Matila Ghyka's *Le Nombre d'Or* (a discussion of the relationship between numbers, proportions and emotions) should have made such a strong impression on him.

The possible dialogues between science and Tradition, art and Tradition, science and art, are rich and fruitful, potentially offering a means of understanding a world borne down by and submerged beneath increasingly alienating complexities.

### **The Theatre as Field of Study — of Energy, Movement and Interrelations**

We believe that Brook's theatre research is structured around three polar elements: energy, movement and interrelations. 'We know that the world of appearance,' writes Brook, 'is a crust—under the crust is the boiling matter we see if we peer into a volcano. How can we tap this energy?'<sup>7</sup> Theatrical reality will be determined by the movement of energy, a movement itself only perceivable by means of certain relationships: the interrelations of actors, and that between text, actors and audience. Movement cannot be the result of an actor's action: the actor does not 'do' a movement, it moves through him/her. Brook takes Merce Cunningham as an example: 'he has trained his body to obey, his technique is his servant, so that instead of being wrapped up in the making of a movement, he can let the movement unfold in intimate company with the unfolding of the music.'<sup>8</sup>

The simultaneous presence of energy, movement and certain interrelations brings the theatrical event to life. With reference to *Orghast*, Brook spoke of 'the fire of the event,' which is 'that marvelous thing of performance in the theatre. Through it, all the things that we'd been working on suddenly fell into place.'<sup>9</sup> This 'falling into place' indicates the *sudden* discovery of a structure hidden beneath the multiplicity of forms, apparently extending in all directions. That is why Brook believes the essence of theatre work to be in 'freeing the dynamic process.'<sup>10</sup> It is a question of 'freeing' and not of 'fixing' or 'capturing' this process

which explains the suddenness of the event. A linear unfolding would signify a mechanistic determinism, whereas here the event is linked to a structure which is clearly not linear at all—but rather one of lateral interrelationships and interconnections.

*Event* is another key word, frequently recurring in Brook's work. Surely it is not simply coincidence that the same word covers a central notion in modern scientific theory, since Einstein and Minkowski? Beyond the infinite multiplicity of appearances, isn't reality perhaps based on one single foundation?

In 1900, Max Planck introduced the concept of the 'elementary quantum of action,' a theory in physics based on the notion of continuity: energy has a discreet, discontinuous structure. In 1905, Einstein formulated his special theory of relativity, revealing a new relationship between space and time: it would contribute to a radical reevaluation of the object/energy hierarchy. Gradually, the notion of an object would be replaced by that of an 'event,' a 'relationship' and an 'interconnection'—real movement being that of energy. Quantum mechanics as a theory was elaborated much later, around 1930: it shattered the concept of identity in a classical particle. For the first time, the possibility of a space/time *discontinuum* was recognised as logically valid. And finally the theory of elementary particles—a continuation of both quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, as well as an attempt to go beyond both of these physical theories—is still in the process of elaboration today.

Like both contemporary scientists and Gurdjieff, Brook is convinced of the materiality of energy. Describing the characteristics of 'rough theatre,' he writes:

The Holy Theatre has one energy, the Rough has others. Lightheartedness and gaiety feed it, but so does the same energy that produces rebellion and opposition. This is a militant energy: it is the energy of anger, sometimes the energy of hate.<sup>11</sup>

Wasn't it Gurdjieff himself who said that: 'Everything in the universe is material, and for that very reason Ultimate Understanding is more materialist than materialism'?<sup>12</sup> Of course he distinguishes 'matter,' which 'is always the same: but *materiality* is different. And the different degrees of materiality directly depend on the qualities and properties of the energy manifested at a given point.'<sup>13</sup> So 'objects' would be localised configurations of energy.

But where does this energy come from? What are the laws governing the transformation of non-differentiated energy into a specific form of energy? Is this non-differentiated energy the

fundamental substratum of all forms? To what extent can actors and audience at a theatrical performance become implicated and integrated with the formidable struggle of energies that takes place at every moment in nature?

In the first place, we believe that it is important to recognise that, in Peter Brook's theatre research, the grouping text-actor-audience reflects the characteristics of a natural system: when a true theatrical 'event' takes place, it is greater than the sum of its parts. The interactions between text and actors, text and audience and actors and audience constitute the new, irreducible element. At the same time, text, actors and audience are true sub-systems, opening themselves up to each other. In this sense, one can talk of the life of a text. As Brook has said many times, a play does not have a form which is fixed forever. It evolves (or involves) because of actors and audiences. The death of a text is connected to a process of closure, to an absence of exchange. In *The Empty Space*, we read that: 'A doctor can tell at once between the trace of life and the useless bag of bones that life has left. But we are less practised in observing how an idea, an attitude or a form can pass from the lively to the moribund.'<sup>14</sup>

Might one not further suggest that the text-actor-audience system possesses another of the important characteristics of natural systems, that of being 'modules of coordination in the hierarchy of nature?'<sup>15</sup> Certainly, in that instance when the spectator emerges from a theatre event enriched with new information in the sphere of energy: 'I have also looked for movement and energy. Bodily energy as much as that of emotions, in such a way that the energy released onstage can unleash within the spectator a feeling of vitality that he would not find in everyday life.'<sup>16</sup> As the bearer of this 'feeling of vitality,' the spectator could participate in other openings and other exchanges, in life.

But what is essential is elsewhere—in the recognition, on its own level, of the action of those laws common to all levels. One can conceive of the universe (as in Gurdjieff's cosmology, or scientific systems theory) as a great Whole, a vast cosmic matrix within which all is in perpetual motion in a continuous restructuring of energies. Such a unity is not static, it implies differentiation and diversity in the existence not of a substance, but of a common organisation: the determining laws of the Whole. These laws are only fully operational when systems are mutually *open* to each other, in an incessant and universal exchange of energy.

It is precisely this exchange that confirms what Gurdjieff called ‘the general harmonic movement of systems,’ or ‘the harmony of reciprocal maintenance in all cosmic concentrations.’<sup>17</sup> The opening of a system prevents its degeneration, and ultimate death. *Inseparability* is the safeguard of life. It is well known that all closed physical systems are subjected to Clausius-Carnot’s principle, which implies an inevitable degeneration of energy, a growing disorder. For there to be order and stability, there must be opening and exchange. Such an exchange can take place between syntheses on one single level, or between systems belonging to different levels.

Almost all of the actors’ ‘exercises’ and ‘improvisations’ in Brook’s Centre seem to aim at engendering opening and exchange. First-hand testimonies to this effect are numerous: one thinks of those published accounts of the preparatory processes for *Conference of the Birds*, *Orghast* and *Carmen*.<sup>18</sup> Brook has explicitly said himself that, by means of these exercises and improvisations, the actors are trying to ‘get to what’s essential: in other words to that point at which the impulses of one conjoin with the impulses of another to resonate together.’<sup>19</sup> Michel Rostain describes how, during the preparation for *Carmen*, one singer would turn his/her back on another, in order to try to recreate the gesture accompanying the other person’s singing *without ever having seen it*. Actors sitting in a circle attempted to ‘transmit’ gestures or words: and in the end the force and clarity of internal images enabled them to be made ‘visible.’ This is genuinely precise and rigorous research work.

In one exercise during the preparation for *Orghast*, each actor represented a part of a single person—including, for example, ‘the voice of the subconscious.’<sup>20</sup> In another, actors took part in the recitation of a monologue from a Shakespearean text, delivering it as a round for three voices: ‘suddenly the actor bursts a barrier and experiences how much freedom there can be within the tightest discipline.’<sup>21</sup> And that is what it is essentially about—the discovery of freedom by submitting oneself to laws which permit an opening towards the ‘unknown,’ towards a relationship. ‘To be means to be *related* ...’ was the startling formula of the founder of General Semantics, Alfred Korzybski.<sup>22</sup> Exercises and improvisations offer the possibility of ‘interrelating the most ordinary and the most hidden levels of experience,’<sup>23</sup> of discovering potentially powerful equivalences between gestures, words and sounds. In this way, words, the usual vehicle of signification, can be replaced by gestures or sounds. ‘Going into the unknown is always frightening. Each letter is the cause of the letter that follows. Hours of

work can come out of ten letters, in a search to free the word, the sound. *We are not trying to create a method, we want to make discoveries.*<sup>24</sup>

So exercises and improvisations have little particular value in themselves, but they facilitate a tuning of the theatrical ‘instrument’ that is the actor’s being, and a circulation of ‘living dramatic flow’<sup>25</sup> in the actors as a group. The theatrical ‘miracle’ is produced *afterwards*, in the active presence of the audience, when an opening towards the ‘unknown’ can be mobilised more fully. But what is the nature of this ‘unknown?’ Is it another name for the unity of indefinite links in ‘systems of systems,’ as Stephane Lupasco would say,<sup>26</sup> in a paradoxical coexistence of determinate and indeterminate, of discipline and spontaneity, of homogeneity and heterogeneity? How can we best understand the words of ‘Attar when he wrote in the ‘Invocation’ to *Conference of the Birds*:

To each atom there is a different door, and for each atom there is a different way which leads to the mysterious Being of whom I speak... In this vast oceans, the world is an atom and the atom a world...?’<sup>27</sup>

Traditional thought has always affirmed that Reality is not linked to space-time: it simply is. When Gurdjieff talked of the ‘trogoautoegocratic process’ which assures the ‘reciprocal nutrition’ of everything that exists, he was proposing it as ‘our infallible saviour from the action, in conformity with the laws, of merciless Heropass...’<sup>28</sup> Once one knows that for him ‘Heropass’ meant ‘Time,’ one can understand the sense of his statement: the unity of indefinite links between systems evades the action of time—it *is*, outside space-time. Time, that ‘unique ideally subjective phenomenon,’ does not exist *per se*. So the space-time continuum, when it is considered in isolation, is a sort of approximation, a subjective phenomenon, linked to a sub-system. Each sub-system, corresponding to a certain ‘degree of materiality,’ possesses its own space-time.

Finally, in certain recent scientific theories,<sup>29</sup> descriptions of physical reality have necessitated the introduction of dimensions other than those of space-time. The physical ‘event’ takes place in all dimensions at the same time. Consequently, one can no longer talk at that level of linear, continuous time. There is a law of causality, but the event occurs in a *sudden* way. There is neither ‘before’ nor ‘after’ in the usual sense of the terms: there is something like a discontinuity in the notion of time itself.



Would it be possible to discuss a theatre ‘event’ without immersing oneself in an experience of time? One might argue that the essence of a Peter Brook theatre event is in its *suddenness*, in its unforeseeable nature (in the sense of the impossibility of precise reproduction at will). Brook says that: ‘The special moments no longer happen by luck. Yet they can’t be repeated. It’s why spontaneous events are so terrifying and marvelous. They can only be rediscovered.’<sup>30</sup> Meaning ‘never belongs to the past’<sup>31</sup>: it appears in the mystery of the present moment, the instant of opening towards a relationship. This ‘meaning’ is infinitely richer than that to which classical ‘rational’ thought has access, based as it is (perhaps without it ever being aware) on linear causality, on mechanistic determinism. At fleeting moments, great actors touch upon this new kind of ‘meaning.’ In Paul Scofield, for example,

... instrument and player are one—an instrument of flesh and blood that opens itself to the unknown...It was as though the act of speaking a word sent through him vibrations that echoed back meanings far more complex than his rational thinking could find.<sup>32</sup>

There is something primitive, direct and immediate in the idea of ‘present moment’—a sort of absolute liberty in relation to performance, a revivifying sentient spontaneity. ‘The idea of present moment,’ writes Pierce, ‘within which, whether it exists or not, one naturally thinks of a point in time when no thought can take place, when no detail can be differentiated, is an idea of *Primacy*...’<sup>33</sup>—Primacy being ‘the mode of being of whatever is such as it is, in a positive way, with no reference to anything else at all.’<sup>34</sup>

The ‘miracle’ of Peter Brook’s theatre work seems to me to reside in precisely this sense of the moment, in the liberation of energies circulating in harmonic flux, incorporating the spectator as active participant in the theatrical event. Paradoxically we find all of the ‘points of convergence’ that have been discussed throughout this study embodied not so much in his film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, but rather in a play like *The Cherry Orchard*. A result perhaps of the difference between cinema and theatre, which Brook has underlined: ‘There is only one interesting difference between the cinema and the theatre. The cinema flashes on to a screen images from the past. As this is what the mind does to itself all through life, the cinema seems intimately real. Of course, it is nothing of the sort—it is a satisfying and enjoyable extension of the unreality of everyday perception. The theatre, on the other hand, always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This is also what can make it so disturbing.’<sup>35</sup> Texts by Chekhov, ‘the dramatist of life’s movement,’<sup>36</sup> or by Shakespeare, enable every dimension of Brook’s

theatre work to be revealed. In *The Cherry Orchard*, there are specific moments when apparently banal words and gestures fall apart, suddenly opened to another reality that one somehow feels to be the only one that counts. A flow of a new quality of energy starts to circulate, and the spectator is carried off to new heights, in a sudden confrontation with him/herself. The marks etched into our memories in this way last a very long time: although theatre is ‘a self-destructive art,’<sup>37</sup> it is nonetheless capable of attaining a certain permanence.

### **The Ternary Structure of Brook’s Theatre Space**

Another remarkable meeting point between Peter Brook’s theatre work, traditional thought and quantum theory, is in their shared recognition of contradiction as the ‘motor’ of every process in reality.

The role of contradiction is apparent in the changes of direction Brook himself has chosen throughout his career, through Shakespeare, commercial comedy, television, cinema and opera: ‘I’ve really spent all my working life in looking for opposites,’ Brook suggested in an interview with *The Times*. ‘This is a dialectical principle of finding a reality through opposites.’<sup>38</sup> He emphasises the role of contradiction as a means of awakening understanding, taking Elizabethan drama as an example: ‘Elizabethan drama was exposure, it was confrontation, it was contradiction and it led to analysis, involvement, recognition and, eventually, to an awakening of understanding.’<sup>39</sup> Contradiction is not destructive, but a balancing force. It has its role to play in the genesis of all processes. The absence of contradiction would lead to general homogenisation, a dwindling of energy and eventual death. ‘Whatever contains contradiction ... contains the world,’ claims Lupasco, whose conclusions are based on quantum physics.<sup>40</sup> Brook points out the constructive role of negation in the theatre of Beckett: ‘Beckett does not say ‘no’ with satisfaction: he forges his merciless ‘no’ out of a longing for ‘yes,’ and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn.’<sup>41</sup>

Contradiction also plays a central role in the works of Shakespeare which ‘pass through many stages of consciousness:’ ‘What enabled him technically to do so, the essence, in fact, of his style, is a roughness of texture and a conscious mingling of opposites...’<sup>42</sup> Shakespeare remains the great ideal, the summit, an indelible point of reference for a possible evolution in theatre:

It is through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys that we get the disturbing and the unforgettable impressions of his plays. It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn on us so deeply.<sup>43</sup>

Brook sees *King Lear* as a ‘vast, complex, coherent poem’ attaining cosmic dimensions in its revelation of ‘the power and the emptiness of nothing—the positive and negative aspects latent in the zero.’<sup>44</sup>

Contradiction is the *sine qua non* of successful theatrical performance. Zeami (1363–1444), one of the first great masters of the Noh—his treatise is known as ‘the secret tradition of the Noh’—observed five centuries ago:

Let it be known that in everything, it is at the critical point of harmonic balance between *yin* and *yang* that *perfection* is located ... if one was to interpret *yang* in a *yang* way, or *yin* in a *yin* way, there could be no harmonising balance, and perfection would be impossible. Without perfection, how could one ever be interesting?<sup>45</sup>

For certain traditional thinkers like Zeami, Jakob Böhme or Gurdjieff, as well as for certain philosophers whose thinking is based on scientific knowledge, like Pierce and Lupasco, contradiction is quite simply the dynamic interrelationship of three independent forces, simultaneously present in every process in reality—an affirmative force, a negative force and a conciliatory force. Therefore reality has a ternary dynamic structure, a ‘trialectical’ structure.

For example, Zeami elaborated a law called *johakyu*, to which Peter Brook often refers. ‘Jo’ means ‘beginning’ or ‘opening’: ‘ha’ means ‘middle’ or ‘development’ (as well as ‘to break,’ ‘crumble,’ ‘spread out’): ‘kyu’ means ‘end’ or ‘finale’ (as well as ‘speed,’ ‘climax,’ ‘paroxysm’). According to Zeami it is not only theatre performance itself which can be broken down into *jo*, *ha* and *kyu*, but also every vocal or instrumental phrase, every movement, every step, every word.<sup>46</sup>

Zeami’s comments are still vitally relevant to us today. One can easily imagine, for example, the boredom provoked by the performance of a tragic play, which begins in climactic paroxysm, then develops through interminable expositions of the causes of the drama. At the same time it would be possible to undertake a detailed analysis of the unique atmosphere created in the plays staged by Peter Brook, as the result of conformity with the law of

*johakyu*—in the structural progression of these plays as well as in the actors' performances. But the most personal aspect of Brook's theatre work seems to lie in his elaboration and presentation of a *new ternary structuring*.

Brook's theatre space could be represented by a *triangle*, with the base line for the audience's consciousness, and the two other sides for the inner life of the actors and their relations with their partners. This ternary configuration is constantly present in both Brook's practice and his writings. In everyday life, our contacts are often limited to a confrontation between our inner life and our relationships with our partners: the triangle is mutilated, for its base is absent. In the theatre, actors are obliged to confront 'their ultimate and absolute responsibility, the relationship with an audience, which is what in effect gives theatre its fundamental meaning.'<sup>47</sup> We will return to the central role of the audience in Brook's theatre space in the next section.

Another ternary structure which is active in theatre space can be located if one accepts the notion of 'centres' proposed by Gurdjieff. He believed that what distinguishes mankind from other organic entities in nature is the fact of being 'tricentric' or 'tricerbral'—a being with three 'centres' or 'brains.' Indeed a human being could be represented by a triangle—the base representing the emotional centre (locus of Reconciliation), the two other sides the intellectual centre (locus of Affirmation) and the instinctive motor centre (locus of Negation). Harmony stems from a state of balance between these three centres.

It is very clear that the conditions of modern life only favour the functioning of the intellectual centre, particularly of the 'automated' part of that centre, what one could call 'cerebral' activity. This ideational element, which is of course a powerful means in man's adaptation to his environment, has changed from a 'means' into an 'end,' adopting the role of omnipotent tyrant. Therefore the triangle representing mankind threatens to break apart, on account of the disproportionate lengthening of one of its sides. Theatrical space, in turn, cannot fail to feel the consequences of this process.

John Heilpern, who has described the C.I.R.T. actors' 'expedition' to Africa, recalled his astonishment when he heard Peter Brook talking about the role of cerebral activity: 'He pointed to the imbalance within us where the golden calf of the intellect is worshipped at the cost of true feelings and experience. Like Jung, he believes that the intellectual—the intellect alone—protects us from true feeling, stifles and camouflages the spirit in a blind collection of

facts and concepts. Yet as Brook talked to me of this I was struck forcibly by the fact that he, a supreme intellectual figure, should express himself this way.<sup>48</sup> As someone who had branded 20<sup>th</sup> Century man as ‘emotionally constipated,’<sup>49</sup> Brook sheds no tears for the ‘deadly theatre,’ which he considers to be the perfect expression of the cerebral element in its attempt to appropriate real feelings and experiences:

To make matters worse, there is always a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, whilst reciting his favourite lines under his breath. In his heart he sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life, and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves.<sup>50</sup>

Harmony between the centres facilitates the development of a new quality of perception, a ‘direct’ and immediate perception which does not pass through the deforming filter of cerebral activity. So a new intelligence can appear: ‘along with emotion, there is always a role for a special intelligence that is not there at the start, but which has to be developed as a selecting instrument.’<sup>51</sup>

A lot of the exercises elaborated by Peter Brook have as their precise aim the development of this state of unity between thought, body and feelings by liberating the actor from an over-cerebral approach. In this way, the actor can be organically linked with him/herself and act as a unified ‘whole’ being, rather than as a fragmented one. Through such research work, one gradually discovers an important aspect of the functioning of the centres—the great difference in their ‘speeds.’ According to Gurdjieff,<sup>52</sup> the intellectual centre is the slowest, whereas the emotional centre is the quickest—its impressions are immediately made apparent to us.

So it is clear in what way the demands of an exercise can enable a discovery of the common rule by mobilising the intervention of the quicker centres. During the *Carmen* rehearsals, actors were asked to walk while at the same time emitting a sound, then to pass from *piano* to *fortissimo* without altering the dynamic and bearing of the walk.<sup>53</sup> The difficulty of this exercise revealed the disharmony between centres, a blocking of the quicker centres by the intellectual one. Compare this with another exercise where actors would be required to mark out rhythms in four/four time with their feet, while their hands kept three/three time. Certain exercises allow something akin to a ‘photograph’ of the functioning of the centres at a given

moment to be taken. Fixed in a certain attitude, the actor can discover the contradictory functioning of these different centres, and thereby find, through experiment, the way towards a more integrated, harmonious functioning.

One might want to establish revelatory points of correspondence between the two triangles—that of Brook's theatre space and that of Gurdjieff's centres. In particular, this 'isomorphism' between the two triangles could well enlighten us as to the role of the audience, in its capacity as catalyst for the emotional centre's impressions. But that would lead us far from our immediate concerns here: and anyway no theoretical analysis could ever substitute for the richness of a first-hand experience of immersion in Brook's theatre space.

The most spectacular illustration of the crucial, primary role of experience in Brook's work is perhaps in the preparation for *Conference of the Birds*. Instead of plunging his actors into a study of 'Attar's poem, or committing them to an erudite analysis of Sufi texts, Brook led them off on an extraordinary expedition to Africa. Confronted with the difficulties inherent in a crossing of the Sahara desert, obliged to improvise in front of the inhabitants of African villages, the actors went inexorably towards a meeting with themselves: 'Everything we do on this journey is an exercise ... in heightening perception on every conceivable level. You might call the performance of a show 'the grand exercise.' But everything feeds the work, and everything surrounding it is part of a bigger test of awareness. Call it 'the super-grand exercise.'<sup>54</sup> Indeed self-confrontation after a long and arduous process of self-initiation is the very keystone to 'Attar's poem. This kind of experimental, organic approach to a text has an infinitely greater value than any theoretical, methodical or systematic study. Its value becomes apparent in the stimulation of a very particular 'quality': it constitutes the most tangible characteristic of Brook's work.

His comments on *Orghast* are as significant and valid for *Conference of the Birds*, as indeed for all of the other performances: 'The result that we are working towards is not a form, not an image, but a set of conditions in which a certain quality of performance can arise.'<sup>55</sup> This quality is directly connected to the free circulation of energies, through precise and detailed (one could even call it 'scientific') work on *perception*. Discipline is inextricably associated with spontaneity, precision with freedom.

## Theatre, Determinism and Spontaneity

How can discipline and spontaneity be made to coexist and interact? Where does spontaneity come from? How can one distinguish true spontaneity from a simple automatic response, associated with a set of pre-existing (if unconscious) clichés? In other words, how can one differentiate between an association—perhaps unexpected, but nonetheless mechanical—with its source in what has been seen already, and the emergence of something really new?

Spontaneity introduces an *indeterminate* element into an evolutionary process. Heisenberg's celebrated 'uncertainty relation,' or 'uncertainty principle' indicates that spontaneity is effectively active in nature. This principle tells us that the product of an increase in quantity of a quantum event's momentum through its spatial extension, or the product of an increase in energy through its temporal extension must be superior to a certain constant representing the elementary quantum of action. So if one were to ask, for example, for a precisely pinpointed *spatial* localization of the quantum event, the result would be an infinite increase on the level of uncertainty of momentum: just as if one were to ask for a precisely pinpointed *temporal* localisation, the result would be an infinite increase in the level of energy. There is no need for a high degree of sophistication in mathematics or physics to understand that this signifies the impossibility of a precise localisation in space-time of any quantum event. The concept of *identity* in a classical particle (identity defined in relation to the particle itself, as a part separate from the Whole) is therefore necessarily smashed apart.

The quantum event is not made up of wave or particle, it is simultaneously wave and particle. The impossibility of precisely locating a quantum event in space-time can be understood as a consequence of the in-separability of events. Their 'aleatory' or 'probabilist' character does not reflect the action of 'chance.' The aleatory quantum is constructive, it has a direction—that of the self-organization of natural systems. At the same time, the observer ceases to be an 'observer'—s/he becomes, as Wheeler has said, 'a participant.' Quantum theory has its place in the 'Valley of Astonishment' (one of the seven valleys in *Conference of the Birds*) where contradiction and indeterminacy lie in wait for the traveller.

One could postulate the existence of a *general principle of uncertainty*, active in any process in reality. It is also necessarily active in theatrical space, above all in the relationship between audience and play. In the 'formula' for theatre suggested by Brook ('Theatre = Rra':

‘Répétition,’ ‘représentation,’ ‘assistance’), the presence—‘assistance’—of an audience plays an essential role:

The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience. This is more than a truism: in the theatre the audience completes the steps of creation.<sup>56</sup>

The audience is part of a much greater unity, subject to the principle of uncertainty: “It is hard to understand the true function of spectator, there and not there, ignored and yet needed. The actor’s work is never for an audience, yet it always is for one.”<sup>57</sup> The audience makes itself open to the actors, in its desire to ‘see more clearly into itself,’<sup>58</sup> and so the performance begins to act more fully on the audience. By opening itself up, the audience in turn begins to influence the actors, if the quality of their perception allows interaction. That explains why the global vision of a director can be dissolved by an audience’s presence: the audience exposes the non-conformity of this vision with the structure of the theatrical event. The theatrical event is indeterminate, instantaneous, unpredictable, even if it necessitates the reunion of a set of clearly determined conditions. The director’s role consists of working at great length and in detail to prepare the actors, thus enabling the emergence of the theatrical event. All attempts to *anticipate* or *predetermine* the theatrical event are doomed to failure: the director cannot substitute him/herself for the audience. The triangle comprising ‘inner life of the actors—their relations with their partners—the audience’s consciousness’ can only be engendered at the actual moment of performance. The collective entity that is the audience makes the conciliatory element indispensable to the birth of the theatrical event: ‘(An audience’s) true activity can be invisible, but also indivisible.’<sup>59</sup>

However invisible it is, this active participation by the audience is nonetheless material and potent: ‘When the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *King Lear* toured through Europe, the production was steadily improving... The quality of attention that this audience brought expressed itself in silence and concentration: a feeling in the house that affected the actors as though a brilliant light were turned on their work.’<sup>60</sup> So it is evident why Brook’s research work tends towards ‘... a necessary theatre, one in which there is only a practical difference between actor and audience, not a fundamental one.’<sup>61</sup> The space in which the interaction between audience and actors takes place is infinitely more subtle than that of ideas, concepts, prejudices or preconditioning. The quality of the attention of both audience and actors enables the event to occur as a full manifestation of spontaneity. Ideally this interaction can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. The C.I.R.T. actors can communicate just as



well with African villagers, Australian aborigines or the inhabitants of Brooklyn; 'Theatre isn't about narrative. Narrative isn't necessary. Events will make the whole.'<sup>62</sup>

Many of the confusions concerning the problem of 'spontaneity' appear to have their source in a linear, mono-dimensional conception of the theatrical event. One can easily believe in the existence of laws such as Zeami's *johakyu*,<sup>67</sup> but that is insufficient in understanding how a theatrical event can take place through the *transition* between the different elements of *johakyu*. If one limits oneself to a strictly horizontal view of the action of *johakyu* (*jo*, the beginning: *ha*, the development: *kyu*, the ending), it is impossible to understand how one might arrive, for example, at the ultimate refinement of the *ha* part of *ha*, or to a paroxysmic peak in the *kyu* part of *kyu*. What can produce the dynamic 'shocks' necessary for the movement not to stop, not to become blocked? How can the necessary continuity of a theatrical performance be reconciled with the discontinuity inherent in its different components? How can one harmonise the progression of the play, the actors' work and the perception liberated in the audience?

In other words, horizontal movement is meaningless by itself. It remains on the same level forever, no information is forthcoming. This movement only acquires a significance if it is combined with an *evolutionary* dynamic. It is as if each phenomenon in reality were subject, at every moment, to two contradictory movements, in two opposing directions: one ascending, the other descending. As if there were two parallel rivers, flowing with considerable force in two opposing directions: in order to pass from one river to the other, an external intervention—a 'shock'—is absolutely essential. This is where the full richness of the significance of the notion of 'discontinuity' is revealed.

But in order for this 'shock' to be effective, a certain concordance or overlap must exist between the 'shock' (which in itself is subject to the law of *johakyu*) and the system upon which it is acting. Therefore it becomes clear why each element of *johakyu* must be composed in turn of the three other elements—in other words, why there has to be a *jo-ha-kyu* sequence within the *jo*, the *ha* and the *kyu*. These different components enable interaction between the different systems to take place.

Therefore, in order for a harmonious movement to appear, a new dimension must be present: *johakyu* is not only active horizontally, but also vertically. If each element (*jo*, *ha* and *kyu*) is composed in turn of three other elements, therefore we obtain *nine* elements, two of which

represent a sort of ‘interval.’ One of these is filled by the ‘shock’ enabling the horizontal transition to take place, the other by the ‘shock’ enabling the vertical transition to take place. In this way, one ends up with a vision of the action of Zeami’s *johakyu* which is very close to the precise mathematical formulation Gurdjieff elaborated for his ‘law of Seven’ or ‘octave law.’<sup>63</sup>

When one considers this two-dimensional vision of the action of *johakyu*, Peter Brook’s insistence on the audience’s central role in a theatrical event becomes clearer. The audience can follow the suggestions proposed to it by the playtext, the actors and the director. The first interval—between *jo* and *ha*—can be traversed by means of a more or less automatic exchange, the play can continue its horizontal movement. But the audience also has its own irreducible presence: its culture, its sensitivity, its experience of life, its quality of attention, the intensity of its perception. A ‘resonance’ between the actors’ work and the audience’s inner life can occur. Therefore the theatrical event can appear fully spontaneous, by means of vertical exchange—which implies a certain degree of will and of awareness—thereby leading to something truly new, not pre-existent in theatrical performance. The ascent of the action of *johakyu* towards the play’s summit—the *kyu* of *kyu*—can therefore take place. The second interval is filled by a true ‘shock,’ allowing the paradoxical coexistence of continuity and discontinuity.

We have described what could be considered to be a first level of perception in a theatre event. This analysis could be further refined by taking into account the tree-like structure (it is never ending) of *johakyu*. Different levels of perception, structured hierarchically in a qualitative ‘ladder,’ could be discovered in this way. There are degrees of spontaneity, just as there are degrees of perception. The ‘quality’ of a theatrical performance is determined by the effective presence of these degrees.

We have also referred to a vertical dimension in the action of *johakyu*. This dimension is associated with two possible impulses: one ascending (evolution), the other descending (entropic involution). The ascending curve corresponds to a densification of energy, reflecting the tendency towards unity in diversity and an augmentation of awareness. It is in this sense that we have described the action of *johakyu* until this point.

But one might well conceive of a *johakyu in reverse*, such as appears, for example, in the subject of Peter Brook’s film *Lord of the Flies*, where one witnessed the progressive

degradation of a paradise towards a hell. An ideal, innocent space exists nowhere. Left to themselves, without the intervention of ‘conscience’ and ‘awareness,’ the ‘laws of creation’ lead inexorably towards fragmentation, mechanicity, and, in the final instance, to violence and destruction. In this way spontaneity is metamorphosed into mechanicity.

It should be noted that ‘spontaneity’ and ‘sincerity’ are closely linked. The usual moral connotation of ‘sincerity’ signifies its reduction to an automatic functioning based on a set of ideas and beliefs implanted into the collective psyche in an accidental way through the passage of time. In this sense, ‘sincerity’ comes close to a lie, in relation to itself. By ridding ourselves of the ballast of what does not belong to us, we can eventually become ‘sincere’: recognising laws, seeing oneself, opening oneself to relationships with others. Such a process demands work, a significant degree of effort: ‘sincerity must be learnt.’<sup>64</sup> In relation to our usual conception of it, this kind of ‘sincerity’ resembles ‘insincerity’: ‘with its moral overtones, the word (sincerity) causes great confusion. In a way, the most powerful feature of the Brecht actors is the degree of their *insincerity*. It is only through detachment that an actor will see his own clichés.’<sup>65</sup> The actor inhabits a double space of false and true sincerity, the most fruitful movement being an oscillation between the two: ‘The actor is called upon to be completely involved while distanced—detached without detachment. He must be sincere, he must be insincere: he must practice how to be insincere with sincerity and how to lie truthfully. This is almost impossible, but it is essential...’<sup>66</sup>

The actor’s predicament is reminiscent of Arjuna’s perplexity when confronted with the advice that Krishna gives him, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, to reconcile action and non-action: paradoxically, action undertaken with understanding becomes intertwined with inaction.

At every moment, the actor is confronted with a choice between acting and not-acting, between an action visible to the audience and an invisible action, linked to his/her inner life. Zeami drew our attention to the importance of intervals of non-interpretation or ‘*non-action*,’ separating a pair of gestures, actions or movements:

It is a spiritual concentration which will allow you to remain on your guard, retaining all of your attention, at that moment when you stop dancing or chanting, or in any other circumstances during an *interval* in the text or in the mimic art. The emotion created by this inner spiritual concentration—which manifests itself externally—is what produces *interest* and enjoyment... It is in relation to the degree of *non-consciousness* and selflessness, through

a mental attitude in which one's spiritual reality is hidden even from oneself, that one must forge the link between what precedes and what follows the intervals of *non-action*. This is what constitutes the inner strength which can serve to reunite all ten thousand means of expression in the oneness of the spirit.<sup>67</sup>

It is only by mastering the attitudes and associations produced in this way that the actor can truly 'play parts,' putting him/herself in others' places. 'At every moment,' wrote Gurdjieff, 'associations change automatically, one evoking another, and so on. If I am in the process of playing a part, I must be in control all the time. It is impossible to start again with the given impulse.'<sup>68</sup> In a sense a free man is one who can truly 'play parts.'

In the light of all that has been said so far in this essay, would it not now be possible to state that there is a very strong relationship between theatrical and spiritual work? Whether one agrees or not, a clear and important distinction between theatre research and traditional research must be made in order to avoid the source of an indefinite chain of harmful confusions, which in any case have already coloured certain endeavours in the modern theatre.

Traditional research addresses itself to man as a whole, calling into play a wide range of aspects, infinitely richer than that of theatre research: after all, the latter's end is aesthetic. Traditional research is closely linked with an oral teaching, untranslatable into ordinary language. Isn't it significant that no traditional writings ever describe the process of self-initiation? In his 'Third Series,' faced with the impossibility of the task, Gurdjieff preferred to destroy his manuscript—what was eventually published as *Life is real only then, when 'I am'* is only a collection of fragments from that manuscript. On several occasions, Saint John of the Cross announced a treatise on the 'mystical union,' but no trace has ever been found of such a work. Finally, 'Attar devoted the major part of his poem *Conference of the Birds* to the story of the discussions between the birds and a description of the preparation for their journey: the journey itself and the meeting with the Simorgh only take up a few lines.

Theatre research clearly has another end in mind: art, theatre. Peter Brook himself has strongly emphasised the need for such a distinction: '*theatre work is not a substitute for a spiritual search.*'<sup>69</sup> In itself the theatrical experience is insufficient to transform the life of an actor. Nevertheless, like a savant, for example, or indeed any human being, the actor can experience *fleetingly* what could be 'a higher level of evolution.' Theatre is an imitation of

life, but an imitation based upon the concentration of energies released in the creation of a theatre event. So one can become aware, on an experiential level, of the full richness of the present moment. If theatre is not really the decisive meeting with oneself and with others, it nonetheless allows for a certain degree of exploration to take place.

This fundamental ambiguity recurs in Grotowski's approach, at least such as it is described by Brook: 'The theatre, he believes, cannot be an end in itself: like dancing or music in certain dervish orders, the theatre is a vehicle, a means for self-study, self-exploration...' <sup>70</sup> According to Brook's conception of the theatre, it cannot lay claim to unity, in terms of its end. Of course one can arrive at certain privileged moments; 'At certain moments, this fragmented world comes together, and for a certain time it can rediscover the marvel of organic life. The marvel of being one.' <sup>71</sup> But theatre work is ephemeral, subject to the influences (both evolved and involuted) of the environment. This impermanence prevents it from leading to 'points of dynamic concentration.' In answer to a question about *Orghast*, Brook replied that theatre work is:

... self destructive within waves... You go through lines and points. The line that has gone through *Orghast* should come to a point, and the point should be a work ... obviously there is a necessary crystallising of the work into a concentrated form. It's always about that—coming to points of concentration. <sup>72</sup>

### **On the Possibility of a Universal Language**

When A.C.H. Smith asked him about the possibility of a 'universal language,' Peter Brook dismissed the question as being meaningless. <sup>73</sup> His response reflects a fear of the stifling of a vital question by endless theoretical considerations, by deforming and maiming abstractions. How many prejudices and clichés are unleashed automatically simply by pronouncing the two words 'universal language'? And yet Brook's entire work testifies to his search for a new language which endeavours to unite sound, gesture and word, and in this way to free meanings which could not be expressed in any other way. But above all this research is experimental: something living emerges into the theatre space, and it matters little what name one gives to it. 'What happens,' Brook asks, 'when gesture and sound turn into word? What is the exact place of the word in theatrical expression? As vibration? Concept? Music? Is any evidence buried in the structure of certain ancient languages?' <sup>74</sup>

The fact that, by themselves, words cannot provide total access to reality has been well known for a long time. In the final analysis, any definition of words by words is based on indefinite terms. Where does linguistic determinism begin, and where does it end? Can it be characterised by a single value, by a finite number of values or by an infinite number? And if, according to Korzybski's famous phrase, 'the map is not the territory,'<sup>75</sup> it nevertheless has the considerable advantage of a structure similar to that of the territory. How can this similarity become operative? The word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation,' writes Brook.<sup>76</sup> Starting with this 'small visible portion,' how can one gain access to the 'gigantic formation' of the universe as a whole? A theatrical event, as has already been suggested, determines the appearance of a ladder structure of different levels of perception. How can any single word encapsulate the sum of these levels?

The relativisation of perception has enabled us to specify a phenomenon's place in reality, as well as how it is linked to the rest. A word, a gesture, an action are all linked to a certain level of perception, but, in the true theatrical event, they are also linked to other levels present in the event. Relativity allows us to uncover the *invariance* concealed behind the multiplicity of forms of phenomena in different systems of reference. This vision of things is close to that implied by the 'principle of relativity' formulated by Gurdjieff.<sup>77</sup>

Relativity conditions vision: without relativity there can be no vision. The playwright who takes his/her own reality for reality as a whole presents an image of a desiccated and dead world, in spite of any 'originality' that he/she might have shown. 'Unfortunately the playwright rarely searches to relate their detail to any larger structure—it is as though they accept without question their intuition as complete, their reality as all of reality.'<sup>78</sup> Death itself can be relativised in an acceptance of contradiction. Brook cites the example of Chekhov: 'In Chekhov's work, death is omnipresent... But he learnt how to balance compassion with distance... This awareness of death, and of the precious moments that could be lived, endow his work with a sense of the relative: in other words, a viewpoint from which the tragic is always a bit absurd.'<sup>79</sup> Non-identification is another word for vision.

Theatre work can be the constant search for a simultaneous perception, by both actors and audience, of every level present in an event. Brook describes his own research in this concise formulation:

... the simple relationship of movement and sound that passes directly, and the single element which has the ambiguity and density that permits it to be read simultaneously on a multitude of levels—those are the two points that the research is all about.<sup>80</sup>

The principle of relativity clarifies what an eventual ‘universal language’ could be. For Gurdjieff, this new, precise, mathematical language had to be centered around the idea of evolution: ‘The fundamental property of this new language is that *all* ideas are concentrated around *one single* idea: in other words, they are all considered, in terms of their mutual relationships, from the point of view of a single idea. And this idea is that of *evolution*. Not at all in the sense of a *mechanical* evolution, naturally, because that does not exist, but in the sense of a conscious and voluntary evolution. It is the only possible kind... The language which permits understanding is based on the knowledge of its place in the evolutionary ladder.’<sup>81</sup> So the *sacred* itself could be understood to be anything that is linked to an evolutionary process.

This new language involves the participation of body and emotions. Human beings in their totality, as an image of reality, could therefore forge a new language. We do not only live in the world of action and reaction, but also in that of spontaneity and of self-conscious thought.

Traditional symbolic language prefigures this new language. When talking about different systems which convey the idea of unity, Gurdjieff said:

A symbol can never be taken in a definitive and exclusive sense. In so far as it express the laws of unity in indefinite diversity, a symbol itself possesses an indefinite number of aspects from which it can be considered, and it demands from whoever approaches it the capacity to see it from different points of view. Symbols that are transposed into the words of ordinary language harden, become less clear: they can quite easily become their own opposites, imprisoning meaning within dogmatic and narrow frame-works, without even permitting the relative freedom of a logical examination of the subject. Reason merely provides a literal understanding of symbols, only ever attributing to them a single meaning.<sup>82</sup>

The fact that a symbol possesses an indefinite number of aspects does not mean that it is imprecise at all. Indeed it is its reading on an indefinite number of levels which confers on it its extreme precision. Commenting on the theatre of Samuel Beckett, Brook writes:

Beckett's plays are symbols in an exact sense of the word. A false symbol is soft and vague: a true symbol is hard and clear. When we say 'symbolic' we often mean something drearily obscure: a true symbol is specific, it is the only form a certain truth can take... We get nowhere if we expect to be told what they mean, yet each one has a relation with us we can't deny. If we accept this, the symbol opens in us a great wondering O.<sup>83</sup>

It is clear therefore why Brook believes Chekhov's essential quality to be 'precision,' and why he states that today '... fidelity is the central concern, an approach which necessitates weighing every single word and bringing it into sharp focus.'<sup>84</sup> Only then can words have an influence: they can become active, bearers of real significance, if the actor behaves as a 'medium,' allowing words to act through and 'colour' him/her, rather than him/her trying to manipulate them.<sup>85</sup>

By forgetting relativity, language has become in time inevitably narrower, diminished in its emotional and even intellectual capacities. It has been necessarily 'bastardised': one word is taken for another, one meaning for another. The *Orghast* experiment showed in a startling way that a return to an *organic* language, detached from the dread bonding of abstraction to abstraction, is possible. Words invented by the poet Ted Hughes and fragments performed in different ancient languages acted as catalysts to the reciprocal transformation between movement and sound, as an expression of an inner state, meaning no longer needing to be filtered solely through cerebral activity. In an interview with *American Theatre*, Brook emphasised that 'actors, whatever their origin, can play intuitively a work in its original language. This simple principle is the most unusual thing that exists in the theatre...'<sup>86</sup>

Evidently the relativisation of perception demands hard work, a considerable effort, an inner *silence* that is a sort of penitence. Silence plays an integral part in Brook's work, beginning with the research into the inter-relationship of silence and duration with his Theatre of Cruelty group in 1964, and culminating in the rhythm punctuated with silences that is indefinitely present at the core of his film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*: 'In silence there are many potentialities: chaos or order, muddle or pattern, all lie fallow—the invisible-made-visible is of sacred nature...'<sup>87</sup> Silence is all-embracing, and it contains countless 'layers.'<sup>88</sup>

One could suggest that events and silence constitute the fabric of any theatre performance. Silence comes at the end of action, as in *Conference of the Birds*: 'A beautiful symbolic opposition is drawn between the black of the mourning material and the hues of the puppets.



Colour disappears, all sparkle is suppressed, silence is established,' observes Georges Banu.<sup>89</sup> The richness of silence confuses, embarrasses and disturbs, and yet it is joy that is hidden within it, that 'strange irrational joy' that Brook detected in the plays of Samuel Beckett.<sup>90</sup>

It is no coincidence that the words 'empty space' form the title of one of the two books on theatre Brook has ever published. One must create an emptiness, a silence within oneself, in order to permit the growth of reality's full potentiality. This is what Tradition has always taught us.

Is silence the premonitory sign of a true 'universal language'? In a passage in *The Empty Space*, Brook writes '... everything is a language for something and nothing is a language for everything.'<sup>91</sup> Is this 'nothing'—'formless,' 'bottomless,' as Jacob Böhme called it—the basis of all form, process and event? And how can one reconcile this infinitely rich, formless silence with aesthetic form, other than through incessant search, continual investigation and pitiless questioning, relentlessly pursued along a cutting edge? Perhaps it is above all 'tightropes' that are missing from contemporary artistic research:

We can try to capture the invisible, but we must not lose touch with common sense... The model as always is Shakespeare. His aim continually is holy, metaphysical, yet he never makes the mistake of staying too long on the highest plane. He knew how hard it is for us to keep company with the absolute—so he continually bumps us down to earth... We have to accept that we can never see all of the invisible. So after straining towards it, we have to face defeat, drop down to earth, then start up again.<sup>92</sup>

Peter Brook is the only one to follow the path he has chosen. On such a path, there can be neither 'sources' nor absolute 'models.'

If one accepts Korzybski's suggestion,<sup>93</sup> the history of human thought can be roughly divided into three periods, adopting as the basis for classification the relationship between the observer and what is observed. In the first period ('pre-scientific'), the observer is everything, while what is being observed has little or no importance. In the second period ('classical' or 'semi-scientific'), what is observed comprises the only important aspect: this 'classical' materialist tendency continues to dominate most areas of concern today. Finally, in the third period ('scientific'—still embryonic at the present time), a period in which Peter Brook seems to us to be one of the boldest explorers, gradually it becomes clear that knowledge results

from a unity between the observer and what is observed. An encounter with Tradition can only enrich and ennoble this conception of unity. For the theatre, such a meeting is not abstract or intellectual, but experimental. One could even suggest that theatre is a privileged field of study of Tradition.

At the end of this essay, perhaps one must confess that it seems impossible to approach Brook's theatre work from a theoretical point of view. All that we can offer is a 'reading,' one of a multitude of other possibilities. In *The Empty Space*, Brook writes:

Most of what is called theatre anywhere in the world is a travesty of a word once full of sense. War or peace, the colossal bandwagon of culture trundles on, carrying each artist's traces to the evermounting garbage heap... We are too busy to ask the only vital question which measures the whole structure: why theatre at all? What for?... Has the stage a real place in our lives? What function can it have? What could it serve?<sup>94</sup>

The question is still being asked.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Petit Robert*, Paris, S.N.L., 1970, p. 1810.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brook in Gérard Montassier, *Le Fait Culturel*, Paris, Fayard, 1980, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Petit Robert*, op. cit., p. 1810.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brook in *Le Fait Culturel*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *Fragments d'un enseignement inconnu* (hereafter *Fragments ...*), Paris, Stock, 1978, p. 393. Published in English as *In Search of the Miraculous*, this remains the most thorough and illuminating introduction to Gurdjieff's thought. For a study of the relationship between Gurdjieff and contemporary scientific thought, see Basarab Nicolescu, 'G.I. Gurdjieff,' in *Encyclopédie des Sciences Esotériques*, Paris, Quillet, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, 'Physique contemporain et Tradition occidentale,' in *3ème Millénaire* no. 2, May/June 1982, pp. 4–13.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brook, *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> A.G.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1972, p. 257.

<sup>10</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff parle à ses élèves*, Paris, Stock/Monde ouvert, 1980, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *Fragments ...*, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ervin Laszlo, *Le systémisme—vision nouvelle du monde*, Paris, Pergamon Press, 1981, p. 59. This is an excellent introduction to systems theory.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brook, *Le Fait Culturel*, op. cit., p. 111

<sup>17</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Récits de Belzébuth à son petit-fils*, Monaco, Rocher/Littérature, Vol. I, pp. 84, 166, 167, 254.

- <sup>18</sup> See A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit.: John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds*, op. cit.: Michel Rostain, 'Journal des répétitions de *La Tragédie de Carmen*' in *Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale*, Vol. XIII, Peter Brook, Paris, Editions de C.N.R.S., 1985.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Brook in the programme for *La Conférence des Oiseaux*, Paris, C.I.C.T. 1979, p. 75.
- <sup>20</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 33.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 127.
- <sup>22</sup> Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, Lakeville, Connecticut, The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co., 1958, p. 161.
- <sup>23</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 255.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 128.
- <sup>26</sup> See for example Stéphane Lupasco, *Les Troil Matières*, Strasbourg, Coherence, 1982.
- <sup>27</sup> Farid ud-Din 'Attar, *Conference of the Birds*, Boulder, Shambhala, 1971, pp. 4–6: translation by C. S. Nott.
- <sup>28</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Récits de Belzébuth à son petit-fils*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 14–15.
- <sup>29</sup> See, for example, articles in the review *3ème Millénaire*, nos. 1-2, 1982, and no. 7, 1983.
- <sup>30</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds*, op. cit., p. 136.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 14–15.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- <sup>33</sup> Charles S. Pierce, *Ecrits sur le signe*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1978, pp. 23–24.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 111.
- <sup>36</sup> Peter Brook in the programme for *La Cerisaie*, Paris, C.I.C.T., 1981, p. 109.
- <sup>37</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 18.
- <sup>38</sup> Peter Brook, interviewed by Ronald Hayman, *The Times*, 29 August 1970.
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>40</sup> Stéphane Lupasco, *Les trois matières*, op. cit., p. 138.
- <sup>41</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>45</sup> Zeami, *La tradition secrète de No.*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 77.
- <sup>46</sup> See for example John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds*, op. cit., pp. 120–21.
- <sup>47</sup> Peter Brook in *Le Fait Culturel*, op. cit., pp. 115–16.
- <sup>48</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds*, op. cit., p. 69.
- <sup>49</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 250.
- <sup>50</sup> Peter Brook *The Empty Space*, op. cit., pp. 12–13.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- <sup>52</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *Fragments...*, op. cit., pp. 275–77
- <sup>53</sup> For a fuller description of such exercises, see Michel Rostain, 'Journal des répétitions de *La Tragédie de Carmen*' op. cit.
- <sup>54</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds*, op. cit., p. 50.
- <sup>55</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 108.
- <sup>56</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 154.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142. (English translator's note: On a literal level, the three French words in Brook's formula above mean rehearsal, performance and attendance, although they also suggest some of the connotations the same words have in English, e.g. rehearsal as an unglamorous repetitive process, performance as re-presentation, etc. Brook plays on this tension.)
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 144.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 25.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 150.
- <sup>63</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds, The Story of Peter Brook in Africa*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, p. 165. According to Gurdjieff, the number of fundamental laws, which regulate every process in the world and in mankind, is very restricted. In his cosmology, the fundamental laws are the ‘law of Three’ and ‘the law of Seven,’ described in exhaustive detail in P.D. Ouspensky’s *Fragments d’un enseignement inconnu*, Paris, Stock, 1978.
- <sup>64</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *Fragments...*, op. cit., p. 216.
- <sup>65</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 130.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 131.
- <sup>67</sup> Zeami, *La tradition secrète du No*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 131. (Translator’s note: Perhaps the most useful of English translations available, both in this instance and elsewhere, is *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, translated by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1984. See ‘Connecting all the arts through one intensity of mind,’ from ‘A mirror held to the Flower,’ p. 230, 96–97).
- <sup>68</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff parle à ses élèves*, Paris, Stock/Monde ouverte, 1980, p. 230.
- <sup>69</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1972, p. 251.
- <sup>70</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 66.
- <sup>71</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 52.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 264.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 255–256
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>75</sup> Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, Lakeville, Connecticut, The International Non-Aristotelian Publishing Co., 1958, p. 58.
- <sup>76</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p.15.
- <sup>77</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *Fragments...*, op. cit., p. 111.
- <sup>78</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>79</sup> Peter Brook, in the programme for *La Cerisaie*, Paris, C.I.C.T., 1981, p. 110.
- <sup>80</sup> A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 248.
- <sup>81</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *Fragments...*, op. cit., p. 112.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 400–401.
- <sup>83</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., pp. 64–65.
- <sup>84</sup> Peter Brook, in the programme for *La Cerisaie*, op. cit., pp. 107–108
- <sup>85</sup> A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>86</sup> Peter Brook, interview published in *American Theatre, 1970–1971*: quoted in A.C.H. Smith *Orghast at Persepolis*, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>87</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 64.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>89</sup> Georges Banu, ‘*La Conférence des Oiseaux, ou le chemin vers soi-même*,’ in *Les Voies de La Création Théâtrale*, Vol. X, Paris, C.N.R.S., 1982, p. 285.
- <sup>90</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 66.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 133.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 69.
- <sup>93</sup> Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, op. cit., p. 99.
- <sup>94</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

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