"In Dangerous Proximity" – the aestheticization of the body as ritualization in dance theater. Non-compulsory reflections upon viewing Raimund Hoghe's *Bolero Variations*

"Everything plays itself out in the dangerous proximity of a threshold as thin as a razorblade, in a slender range of interference, in a psychological no man's land, in a domain of the sacrum *par excellence*: on a knife-edge, over which hovers taboo (whose only significance is to prevent sacrilege, to inhibit profanation), at the limits where all things lose the directionless, amorphous nature of the secular, and polarize into left and right."1 Thus wrote Michel Leiris in *Mirror of Tauromachy*, a mythico-theological theorem/epic poem; his topic was not, of course, dance – it was the act of killing.

Leiris's work investigates the ritual of inflicting wounds, the scandalous act of risking human life and murdering animals. As an adherent of the non-religious sacrum of daily life, the writer champions the significance of death and physical suffering, much like Father Louis Bouyer, a defender of the old rites of the Catholic liturgy. The French monk and the French Surrealist/ethnographer both locate the source of the erosion of contemporary spirituality in a fear of becoming involved. "... [O]bserving that someone does something for you," Bouyer writes, "in your stead, as it were, is the direct opposite of doing it along with him, of joining him." These two modern "spiritual men" seem to suggest that contemporary man has found ways of insuring himself against extreme experiences; by the same token, he has left the zone which allows him contact with the non-human. This zone, this no man's land, is our body. This is what makes us mortal, what gives us fear. It is through the body that death – i.e. "the world to come" – incarnates itself in life, in "me."

We treat the body as neither belonging to the matter of the external world, nor entirely controlled by human spirituality. The body is not "me," it is "mine," like a slave. But the body also reigns over the consciousness, to which it essentially belongs, because it can inflict pain upon it. The disease-ridden body is particularly rapacious, "threatening us" with suffering – it is then cast out, and we protect ourselves against it with expulsion. The priest and the poet equally reject the reduction of the suffering body to an object, both strive to see it as a place where the visible flesh can take invisible form, both strive to see the sacrifice as a sign of the covenant. Between them, of course, yawns a vast space, dividing religious transformation and

1 All quotes taken from: Michel Leiris, *Mirror of Tauromachy*, Atlas Press 2007.

esthetic delight. Nonetheless, this is their common ground – a ground which, in Western culture, is filled by the staged event with live performers.

Fascinated by the *corrida,* with its theology tied to the pre-Ecumenical mass, the French Surrealist thus combines an attempt to penetrate the mystery of theatralization as a passage from an absolutely artificial experience to one of absolute authenticity. Both stand on the verge of a self-conscious spectacle, while not wanting to be *only* this in full consciousness. Raimund Hoghe's play, about which I shall now briefly remark, appears to strive to heal the open wound self-inflicted by contemporary man – his inability to find significance in the experience of suffering.

1. The task which theater set before itself in the 20th century was to restore faith in the stage experience through disillusion, which was to provide witnesses and participants in a stage event with a direct encounter of something compelling. This "something" was to be the limit of theatrical signification, a newly-discovered sphere of direct encounter between the intimate and the real. To this end, Artaud was painfully cruel, Beckett extremely ascetic and Grotowski laid himself bare. On the road to reducing the imagination, each arrived at the body, and each

in his process of cleansing the stage of its theatrical attributes stood on the verge of religious ritual.

The Bolero Variations begins from the absolute beginning... The void? A beginning of theatricality itself starts to construct an order in which a person's presence could have some kind of significance. And here we have a short man in faded black garb, marking the space of the stage with slow steps. He skirts a ring, an arena, divides separate places; he may not yet be "holy," but he is clearly preparing for an extraordinary event... At stage front are the wings of two curtains, bunched to form columns, from behind which dancers unexpectedly emerge; another black curtain/column stands stage center, and there the dancers vanish. The undefined space of the stage reminds us of something; it is as though it has been consciously stretched to its limits... beyond which, for the time being, we have a no man's land.

The human body does not signify, it merely occupies space. The body is present, and thus visible; it presents itself, and thus demands recognition of its image. The image of what? This question opens the space of the inevitable, which is not a direct experience; on the contrary, we know it through the body, and never otherwise. The meaning of this presence must be developed, significance must be bestowed unto the body. Theatralization is a ritual process in itself, it transforms the meaningless presence of bodily matter into an existence that

emanates meaning. In this way the body acquires a value greater than the price of admission to the play, whatever it may be.

A moment later the performer, like a Master of Ceremonies or an officiating priest, and thus conscious of his role, leaves his designated place. A place thus marked seems to pose the question of significance. The square of the floor-area becomes (as we later understand?) the base of a ziggurat, the foundation of the labyrinth which trapped the Minotaur; it is perhaps the floor of a cathedral with a palimpsest of trails on some subterranean map to guide dancing pilgrims. This square is all that is earthly, it is the earthly beginning of a chosen journey to spin a complete circle – after many twists and turns, winding roads and corridors, approaching the destination and distancing from it – to delve inside of oneself, to describe a conclusion, to close an eternal cycle, to approach the unearthly, and thus the non-human.

The artist delves to the core, to the animal roots of human spirituality. The performance uses "artificial" actions to shift from the wild, distinct, bizarre animal body, alien to our perception, to the transformed body, sanctified in its everyday humanity and known to all. In the theater, this process occurs as intentionally composed movements of the body, affected by the story told through the body. In marking out the space, Hoghe follows three paths/corridors: the pagan ritual of the corrida, the fight with the Minotaur, and the Mitran initiation rituals. He follows the mystic path of the Christian sacrifice of the incarnated man-God, leading to the resurrection, and the worn path of history and culture as a cyclic struggle for rebirth and transformation. Yet ultimately he builds a play – a score for stage, based on a mythical structure that abstracts from all those story lines, which in turn serves as a basis for the (no less abstract) structure of the initiation ritual. After all, we are decisively in the here and now, in the theater, we have not traveled to the temple of any particular god. We are in an artificial world, and that is why we can "believe" what is being presented before our eyes – each according to his own cult of worship.

Do we have material bodies in order to reveal them to one another? Yes, but not as entirely physical creatures. The aestheticization of the body in contemporary dance does not involve turning the body into a tool or a vehicle imposed on it by the intellect of sign functions, as it did in ballet, or as it can do in drama. The aim is more for "theatralization" – i.e. subjecting the body to the rigors of a convention – to extract a "corporeal" (and not merely

physical) presence from the body. This occurs when the body moves (on its own) aimlessly, and thus in a way that generates significance; the body does not "emulate," it rather "follows in the footsteps" of what it could be like. Such a body less "acts" or "does" than "performs" itself in the process of searching out a single form for matter as such. If it succeeds, the body

becomes so "evocative" that it makes all verbalization redundant. The performance then becomes an act, and a transformation takes place – matter turns into meaning.

2. In his childhood, Raimund Hoghe was struck by an illness that afflicted his corporeal form and disfigured his human shape – for all his life he will remain different, altered, deformed – a hunchback. His physical variance was joined by a (later comprehended) sexual variance. A relationship with an odd, deformed, monstrous body gives the individual a first sense of community practices. These are as varied as responses to difference can be: contempt or sanctification, revulsion or fascination, removal from sight or holding up on display. In the theater the body is "not itself," it is "unselfed," concealed behind the role, as it were, and yet also put on display, in full view. Such a body is haloed in significance. We recognize the body at once as an identity. The corrida bull, the Minotaur, the Faun – these fantastical/mythic creatures are stored in the chambers of our memory, in the crannies of our imagination, in the winding paths of history – they both are and are not among us. They lead a peculiar sort of existence, one that is culturally indispensable, they are marked by an inevitability we hasten to take for eternity.

"Manuel Laureano Rodríguez Sánchez, better known as Manolete, probably the most famous matador in Spanish history, entered the arena for the last time in a splendid costume. During 500 corridas he had defeated over one thousand bulls. He was distinguished by a calm, cold-blooded attitude and a faultless technique. Confronted with a bull that was boiling with rage he maintained utter indifference. He would turn one side to the bull, adopting a statuesque posture. Manolete's motions had a slow nobility – only his wrist moved. On 28 August 1947, in Linares, he was killed by a bull named Islero, bred at the Miura Ranch. The matador gave the animal the fatal blow with his sword, but a moment later was stabbed in the thigh by a horn. The audience managed to reward him with the ears of the felled bull. Then Manolete lost consciousness. Blood transfusions were in vain, he died the same afternoon." 2

The corrida is "pure" sport and "pure" dance, in which one actually crosses over into eternity. The corrida is thus a liturgy, a spectacle which pretends to be nothing apart from what it gives us to participate in; at the same time, the nearness of death makes us sense a kind of excitement in encountering real life. In the arena a sacrifice is really made, upon the sand. Similarly, when the dancer's body hits the floor, when he sweats and pants, is this not part of the play?

2 *Korrida wraca do _ask*, Bartosz Marzec, 29.03.2008 rp.pl

As opposed to the inevitably mimetic dramatic play, the dancer's performance seems more "for real." The dancer does not fake things like an actor, he really exerts his body, then offers the results to the audience. Hoghe clearly builds a sacrificial figure on stage, but he holds salvation not for the "soul" – that thing deprived of all sensual qualities – but for the body, condemned to be restricted to matter, yet "important" in its being evident and irrefutable, as if it were the object (subject?) of a universal cult. This is why every ritual requires choreography, and choreography holds a trace of ritual design. Contemporary dance, which is both a spontaneous expression of human physicality and a form of rootedness in a cultural context, thus becomes a tool and a mechanism of a real, and not just a metaphorical transformation – of the invisible private into the visible shared.

If our Western imagination in invariably haunted by the image of the suffering Christ, then this is rather *Ecce Homo* – every one of us. This is the Everyman, i.e. no one in his/her singularity; and then, as in a medieval morality play, (s)he becomes the very picture of a paradox – our unity in suffering. In tracing the Spanish religious sensitivity, the author draws from images of martyrdom, of corporeal suffering in the name of spiritual growth. In the Spanish churches Jesus is in a mystical wine press, blood literally pours, he suffers physical pain and shows its visible effects, for the witnesses are meant to "sympathize," to experience the same thing, while watching the... play. The Son of God in a human body suffers through his body, which links us to the animals; thus the Savior bleeds like a wounded bull in the corrida arena, gouged with spades, awaiting the final thrust of the toreador's blade, which will level its animal nature with the knight's, humanize it in the moment of death. "They look on the one whom they have pierced," says the Bible; humiliation becomes the road to resurrection, into a more perfect body and a better existence.

3. In the play's culminating scene, the officiant carries a white tablecloth on stage, and spreads it at the back, precisely in the center. He exits slowly, only to return with white flakes of plaster and a bowl of water. Water, Wine, Milk, and Blood are not themselves on the stage; they are, as in the liturgy, substances on the brink of transformation. And regardless of the theological resolution we prefer (symbol or event), the object in the theater inevitably loses its ordinary identity; it is not revealed as a thing-in-itself, but immediately transforms into significance. But whence does the significance derive if not from the spirituality we are "granted"? Comprehension comes from a mysterious place – from faith, from tradition, from education – from a place that has granted us life no less than our corporeal parents.

"Take and eat, for this is my body, take and drink, for this is my blood." The bodily fluids return to the body, now a temple and a slaughterhouse. Unlike the ritual killing and burning of the body, Christianity puts forward a ritual consumption of the body, a nourishment as an unending continuance of the holiness of existence and a foretelling of the resurrection. Blood spilled in battle, the blood of the slaughtered returns to the body to restore it. Now animal flesh transformed into the human body becomes the pure form of being. But no longer here, not on stage, not in view, because it is not before witnesses.

Sacrifice really "happens" elsewhere; anonymity is one form of universalization. The factual summoning of the story of the Jewish girl saved through art/music in Auschwitz in turn summons an image of the camp as a mystical press, as a ritual slaughterhouse... A risky juxtaposition? After all, it was not by chance that the Jews called that monstrously "banal" (as Hanna Arendt taught us to see it) act of genocide the *Holocaust* – i.e. the burnt offering. Meanwhile, if we see only murder in the corrida, then this would be the same, with no sacrifices of saints, murder of Jesus, murder of millions of Jews, Poles, Romani, Kurds, Tibetans, religious folk, cripples.... If we recognize the murder of millions for their "otherness" as the "taking of lives" and nothing more, then we discover we do not know how to find significance in suffering, and we condemn ourselves to the fate of wounded flesh.

But whose flesh is it? It is precisely this "unification" that was to be annihilated. Can you hear the joyful shout of the victors? Theater can (and does, even today) serve to degrade corporeality, reading it as a bold gesture of disenchantment. But it does not have to. Theatrical artificiality is perfectly suited for preserving a body – which "always belongs to someone" – in its natural form, as a person. The ritual of redemption, the sacralization of the slaughtered body, aims to "salvage" the form of the single body from being reduced to "no man's." And yet, this will not be the first time things do not end here...

"To incarnate death in life," returning to Leiris, "to make it somehow exquisite (like the gesture of the Toreodor, who gently draws the bull into the folds of his cape, or *muleta*);

this should be what the activity of building mirrors is about – and here I have in mind all those whose most pressing aim is to compose facts that emerge in places where we feel that we cling to the world and to our own selves, because they give us a sense of fullness, of the suffering that lurks within us, and of our own ludicracy."

For in this celebration of a certain incarnated story, haven't the viewers become ordinary viewers of actions performed for them by a holy man? By a guide who no longer, however, stands with them at the front of their community, and does not join their activities... Some, like those defending the old liturgy of the Oratorians from Saint-Wandrille Abbey,

claim that "no one truly unites with the action he observes," thus accepting the role of viewer. "On the contrary, he participates in it only when joined with the priest, when he himself stands at the front, like the head of the body we are to form with him." Are we therefore dealing here, in the theater, with a liturgy of participation we long to believe in, or perhaps a pseudo-liturgy, no more than a spectacle – a liturgical image?

In the play's culminating scene, the dancer stands with his back to the audience the whole time, like a priest conducting the mass from before the Second Vatican Council, his body twisted in our direction (that of the pious), for it "will be given to us and to the many." In today's Catholic liturgy, God's People stare themselves in the face, in the old engraving the Mystic Body of the Church met the Mystic Body of Christ blind... And thus, perhaps – through touch?

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