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T H E H I G H E R E G O

*When I was very young I used
to say "I"; later on I said
"I and Mozart"; then "Mozart
and I"; now I say "Mozart."*

CHARLES GOUNOD

Our artistic natures have two aspects: one that is merely sufficient for our ordinary existence and another of a higher order that marshals the creative powers in us. By accepting the objective world of the imagination, the independent interplay of our images, and the depth of the subconscious activity in our creative lives, we open up the very limited boundaries of our "personalities." We confront the Higher Ego.

Both of these two functions are clearly perceptible in a developed artist. How often is his day-to-day life unexpectedly simple, in contrast to his professional life in which he is an

exceptional individuality. Anton Chekhov collected one-kopek coins with the utmost seriousness; Maxim Gorky could not stand people looking at him; I saw Stanislavsky obsessively dusting chairs, tables, and shelves in his apartment, without any apparent necessity for it; Yevgeny Vakhtangov played simple tunes on the mandolin for hours, without ever achieving any great heights in this art.

But the usual ego is not what stirs our imagination. It is the other, the Higher Ego, the artist in us that stands behind all our creative processes. The more an artist recognizes this higher function in himself, the more he is influenced by it in his creative work. To turn our consciousness upon it, to see the concreteness of its specific powers and qualities, is a means of strengthening our connection with it. Let us therefore discuss four main ways in which our Higher Ego can influence our practical artistic work.

CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY

Suppose a group of painters sat before the same landscape with their paints, and each promised himself faithfully to record the view before him. What would be the result? Several entirely different pictures would emerge. Why is this so? Because the artists did not paint the landscape, but their own individual conception of it, one made possible by each painter's Creative Individuality. They painted exactly the same subject, but they did not render the landscape that they saw outwardly; they painted the landscape within themselves. The voice of each artist's Creative Individuality inspired his particular interpretation. Their pictures will tell us that one of them was more charmed by the atmosphere of the landscape, another by the beauty of the form and line, the third by the language of contrasts, and so on.

"How often has *Iphigenia* been written and still each interpretation is different," wrote Goethe, "and this is because each sees and expresses the thing differently in accordance

with this artistic perception.” The same is true of the stage. We often hear it said, for instance, that there is only one Hamlet—the one that Shakespeare created. But who knows what Shakespeare’s Hamlet was? The actor who venerates Shakespeare and reproduces his characters exactly, without individual deviations, may become like the musician who idolized Beethoven to such an extent that he finally ceased to play his music because he was afraid of an inexact reproduction of Beethoven’s ideas. The actor will more adequately express his reverence for Shakespeare if he allows the spark of his individual fire to be kindled by Shakespeare’s flame, instead of sycophantically and coolly “obeying” him by giving an impersonal recitation of Shakespeare’s text from the stage.

I once revealed to a celebrated Russian writer my theatrical conception of considering Hamlet’s destiny as being enclosed between two worlds. Starting with the meeting of the spirit of his father, when his sole attitude is directed toward a higher being and an unknown world, Hamlet finishes by looking downward into the grave, meditating on the nothingness of human existence. How exciting it would be to follow the composition of the events of Hamlet’s destiny, enclosed in the frame of these two polarities! The famous writer asked, ironically, “Do you think that Shakespeare was of your opinion?” There is no answer for this dry, intellectual point of view. With all modesty the actor must have his own approach to what he is going to create.

On another occasion, I observed the psychology of an actor who was constantly drawn to evil, negative characters. Strangely enough, the more expressively he performed them, the more sympathetic they became, remaining nevertheless unmistakably evil. His secret became clear when I understood that the basic aim of his Creative Individuality was to vindicate the human condition. Speaking of a French poet, Goethe maintained, “He has found common recognition, not because of his poetic value, but because of the greatness of his character, which stands out from all his writings. The style of

the writer," he continued, "is a true expression of his Inner Being." The same note is heard when Goethe spoke of Shakespeare as "a being of the higher order."

This aim of our Creative Individuality is not to be confused with propaganda, which is a preconceived and schematically devised and fixed expression. This confusion can lead to such extremes in the theatre as one Soviet production of *Hamlet*, which ridiculed the idea of monarchy, court, and aristocracy. Hamlet was played as a brutal, dirty lad with crown askew and a squalling pig under his arm, while Ophelia was a drunken prostitute. But the true voice of the Creative Individuality does not normally lead one to approach each complicated part with the "idea" of performing the hero "just as I am in my everyday life," whether the character be Faust, Lear, Hamlet, or any other. This is a way of simply avoiding *any* approach to the problem.

Freeing and stimulating our Creative Individuality can be helped by exercises such as the following:

EXERCISE II.

Study a character that you think you could act until you are familiar with it. Then try to imagine it as performed by different actors whom you know well. Observing the acting of the same part by different Creative Individualities, try to see wherein lies the difference in their acting. What features of the character become more marked in each of these cases? Which is more sympathetic? Which less? And so on. You will gradually learn to see the Creative Individualities of the actors through the mask of the character.

Conclude this exercise by acting the same part yourself in your imagination. Here you will experience something like a meeting with your own Creative Individuality, as a contrast to all others. Remem-

ber not to analyze your Creative Individuality. Confine yourself to experiencing it.

EXERCISE 12.

Choose some very simple business, like cleaning a room, finding a lost article, setting the table. Repeat this action at least twenty or thirty times. Each time avoid repetition of any kind. Do each action in a new way with a fresh inner approach. Keep only the general "business" as a spine for the exercise.

By doing this exercise you will develop your originality and ingenuity, and with them you will gradually awaken the courage of your individual approach to all that you do on the stage. As a result, you will later on be able to improvise on the stage quite freely at all times. This means that you will always find new, individual ways to fulfill old business, remaining within the frame given by the director. You will discover gradually that the real beauty of our art, if based on the activity of the Creative Individuality, is constant improvisation.

DISCERNMENT OF GOOD AND EVIL

Now for the second function of our Higher Ego. Everything in our art is built on the dynamic of the constant conflict between good and evil. This may seem to be an obvious truth, but consider how often we see artists—as well as people in everyday life—who are inclined to worship power as such, and to become intoxicated by it without distinguishing what kind of power it is. It is well known that this acceptance of unqualified and limitless control over others is detrimental to our social order.

It is not so obvious to the actor in his own sphere, however, that the inability to distinguish between good and evil makes

his character flat on the stage. He misses all the various nuances in his performance and forces himself to bluntly express the notion of power in general. All sorts of clichés, bodily tensions, and so on, creep into the actor's work. He loses the aim of the author, which is always hidden behind the fight between good and evil in whatever form it may appear. He kills the ethical aspect of the play. He makes himself, the author, and the performance foreign to the present time, in which good and evil, right and wrong, are burning problems and driving factors. He enfeebles the sense of truth in contemporary society. On the other hand, good and evil, if they find response and comprehension, can give the actor the key to the very heart, the dynamic and inner composition, of the play and of acting itself. The ability to distinguish between good and evil is also the function of our Higher Ego. This ability can be increased by means of exercises.

EXERCISE 13.

Again appeal to your Creative Imagination, but this time your task will be to find out what particular kind of positive or negative impulses are conflicting in a play. What kind of evil is represented in King Claudius, Cornwall, Edmund, Iago, Polonius, Richard III? What and how positive are the characters opposing them? In what way is this opposition expressed? What possibilities for positive qualities lie in King Claudius, Caliban, and Rosencrantz? Wherein lies the charm of Edmund, Iago, Malvolio, Falstaff, Queen Anne, and Gertrude?

Not only will innumerable nuances become clear to you through such practice, but you will also see the meaning of artistic disguise, when evil hides behind the mask of good and good glimmers through the mask of evil. You will see that there never can be unqualified good and evil on the stage. By the same

token, there cannot be undifferentiated power. Each manifestation of power speaks about a definite form of good and evil, the variety and interplay of which is unlimited.

CONTEMPORARY LIFE

Now let us speak about the third function of our Higher Ego. Since life, especially our contemporary life, is the manifestation of an enormous war between good and evil, expressed in countless variations, the actor must ask himself how he can relate his art to this panorama of struggle. It is through the medium of the spectator that we find a full creative approach that links us to the world and its times.

Vakhtangov was asked how his suggestions as a director were embodied in the play in a manner that was inevitably "conveyed" to the audience. His answer was "I never direct before an empty audience room. From the first rehearsal, I imagine the theatre filled with the audience. When giving my suggestions or demonstrating to the actor this or that passage, I 'hear' and 'see' clearly the reaction of the imaginary audience and reckon with it. Very often I quarrel with the imaginary audience and insist upon my point of view." Vakhtangov knew only too well that people often want to experience something other than that which they need to experience.

A contrasting example is found in a well-known playwright who was reading his new play to a group of friends. He started reading with calm assurance, clearly and expressively. Soon he came to a highly dramatic incident; his voice trembled, but he overcame it and went on. Soon, however, he was forced to pause and drink a glass of water, and long before his listeners understood wherein the real drama lay, they heard sobs from the author and tears poured down his cheeks. At the end he was openly and sincerely crying, but completely swallowing the text at the same time.

The comparison is clear. Vakhtangov created for the audi-

ence, the playwright for himself. No doubt his drama was deeply moving, but it did not come through because he wrote it without any connection with an audience. Vakhtangov grew and developed because he was in contact with his contemporaries. His profession became for him a part of the social life of his time, and the audience became for him the transmitter of public opinion. He listened to it and kept pace with his time, but was never subservient to it. "Success" was never for him the measurement of audience approval nor journalistic immediacy, as is so often the case.

Vakhtangov was a rabid newspaper reader, but he was not looking for sensational themes that would satisfy the hungry spectator. Instead, current and contemporary reportage was consciously combined in his mind with scenes and characters from plays. As he read his newspapers, flashes of remote events in Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, as well as sequences from modern plays, arose in his imagination. When he read plays he perceived through them the incidents of life itself. Both appeared before him in a new light. From the newspaper in his hand, he knew how he would produce or act *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, or *King Lear* in terms of the events of his time. All of this was because he was a strong individual, who comprehended the problem of good and evil, and knew how to open his consciousness to the audience and to humanity in general.

EXERCISE 14.

Concentrate on the plays, but this time you must add to your exercise an imaginary audience. You must see the theatre filled with the audience, an audience of today, which comes from the whirl of life, from its offices, its newspapers, radios, from private life, from its colleges, factories, political affairs, and so on. Before this imaginary audience you must act or direct your plays, and ask certain definite questions: What

is the purpose of this play in our present time? What will the audience derive from it? What use will it serve in modern society? What feelings, thoughts, and will-impulses will it arouse in a contemporary spectator? Will it drug the audience and make it indifferent to the events of contemporary life with all its conflicts, or will it arouse in the audience a protest against negative powers? Does it amuse the audience by inflaming its lower feelings, or does it call upon its sense of humor and refresh it with sound laughter, as do Shakespeare's comedies? Which aspect of the play and characters must be stressed in the production of the play, and which should be made less significant in order to achieve a positive result for a contemporary audience? How will the audience leave the theatre after the performance? Will it be provoked by the performance to act in the world?

The modern director and actor must know the audience, its power and weakness, its leading and misleading influences. It cannot be dependent upon the second-hand opinions of "specialists," but must be based upon the personal experience of meeting the audience in imagination and in reality. Only then will the director or actor hear the powerful voice of public opinion and be able to struggle with it if necessary. To the extent that he has awakened his own higher self, he will feel himself tuned to the pulse of his times.

THE OBJECTIVITY OF HUMOR

The more conscientiously we develop our Higher Ego, the more this grants us the faculty of humor. When we can detach our immediate egotistical reactions from everyday emotional events and interactions, they often reveal themselves in a really humorous light. The more our higher self is trained, the more likely we are to leave personal things behind us. We

become objective in our perceptions as the artist should. Many things that previously excited us emotionally, and therefore hid from us their humorous features, now show themselves completely. The Higher Ego frees humor in us by freeing us from ourselves. Of course, not all laughter comes from the developed self, and not all giggling is laughter.

An illustration of this point: Anton Chekhov was able totally to forget his self-interest in normal surroundings. His care for others often overstepped even the limits of reason. He allowed himself, for instance, to be tortured for hours by visitors whose only aim was to enjoy the presence of a famous man. His humor was as great as his capacity for self-denial; therefore, he saw more than the people around him, and often his quiet, unexpected laughter brought embarrassment to others because humor through self-denial was not known to them. Such a man laughs easily even at himself, at times when other people become irritated and angry.

Once, not long before his death, Chekhov was walking along the streets of Yalta. Suddenly a crowd of boys began to pursue him and heartlessly shout after him, "Old Anton Chekhov's got consumption! Old Anton Chekhov's got consumption!" They were provoked by his hollow figure with stooped shoulders and sunken, yellow cheeks. What was Chekhov's reaction? A warm smile lingered on his lips. Of course it was not broad humor; it was the quality of self-denial that gave him the ability to describe children with love and great humor.

Many years ago, in the depths of Russia, a hermit was living his last days. He was the last of the true religious mystics. He had spent forty years in religious exercises and had attained great spiritual heights. I had the happy opportunity of visiting him, and never have I met even in ordinary social life a gayer person or one who was able to laugh so heartily, easily, and fully! His small, bent figure, his old blue eyes, radiated contagious humor, which arose purely from his Higher Ego.

In this chapter we have discussed the four main functions

of the actor's Higher Ego. First, individual interpretation of the plays and parts; second, the ability to distinguish between the powers of good and evil; third, the relationship of the actor to the time in which he lives; and last, the objectivity of humor through the liberation of the actor from his narrow, selfish ego. All this widens the mental outlook of the actor, sharpens his perceptions, and makes his artistic work more significant.