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He to Pray, I to Create:¹ The Concept of Kenosis and the Stanislavski System

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By the summer of 1906, Konstantin Stanislavski had reached a point of crisis. Anton Chekhov had died in 1904 as had the Moscow Art Theatre's principal financial backer Morozov. A recent production of a play had failed and a promising experimental studio venture had failed. The revolution of 1905-06 made theatrical production in Moscow difficult if not impossible. While taking a summer rest in Finland, the forty-three-year-old actor-producer realized he had lost his zest for acting.² Recalling the memory of that summer nearly twenty years later in his memoir *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski wrote:

Why was it then that the more I repeated my roles the more I sunk backward into a stage of fossilization? Examining my past, step by step, I came to see clearer and clearer that the inner content which was put into a role during its first creation and the inner content that was born in my soul with the passing of time were as far apart as the heaven and the earth. Formerly all issued from a beautiful, exciting, inner truth. Now all that was left of this truth was its wind-swept shell, ashes and dust that struck the niches of the soul due to various accidental causes, and that had nothing in common with true art.³

Stanislavski was frustrated by the elusiveness of inspiration. He located his dissatisfaction in his inability to put himself into a creative state of mind, especially when playing the same role repeatedly. An accomplished and celebrated actor in mid-career, Stanislavski was now searching for a way to create "the life of the human spirit" and to present of that creation on stage in an artistic form.⁴ For Stanislavski, it would have to be possible to not only master this way, and even to make of it a habit, but also to teach the way to others.

¹ Stanislavsky, Constantin, *My Life In Art*, trans. J. J. Robbins (New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 454.

² Stanislavsky 558.

³ Stanislavsky 459.

⁴ Magarshack, David, *Stanislavsky: A Life* (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1951) 30.

The key or the "pivot" of what would become the system is the entrance, or the way, from the conscious to the sub-conscious, and Stanislavski's first discoveries all relate in some way to the problem of *entrance*. Once inside the temple, that is in the creative state of mind, "Nature... will [herself] take a hand in whatever the actor is doing on stage, with the result that the subconscious and even inspiration will be given a chance of asserting themselves." But too often, the entrance to the creative state of mind is blocked by "private worries, petty resentments, successes or failures." This is, indeed the normal state of mind, but from it, there must be a way to enter the creative state of mind where the creation of the human spirit of the role could be accomplished. How then could this entrance be found?

By the time he returned from Finland to Moscow in the fall Stanislavski had determined to discover the technical means whereby he could, at will, "enter the temple of that spiritual atmosphere in which alone the sacrament of creative art is possible."⁵ From these discoveries would emerge a system that would eventually transform the art of acting in the twentieth century. In his introduction to the Stanislavki's *System and Methods of Creative Art*,⁶ David Magarshack summarizes the discoveries Stanislavski made during and immediately following the summer of 1906. The first three, in particular, relate to matter of entering.

- 1) to enter into the creative state of mind, the actor must be in a state of complete freedom of body through the relaxation of muscles and
- 2) completely attentive and centered on what is taking place in the soul of the character being represented.⁷
- 3) In Finland that summer, Stanislavski had reflected on the actor's preparation for the first entrance onto the stage. Whereas, actors took some considerable care in making up their faces and dressing their bodies, most took little time to "dress their souls," to make spiritual preparations for entrance. These preparations include leaving behind the circumstances of life outside the theatre for the circumstances of the play and the role to be played. It is on this time between arriving at the theatre and making the

⁵ Magarshack 17.

⁶ Magarshack, *System and Methods of Creative Art*, a series of lectures to opera singers given between 1918 & 1922.

⁷ Magarshack, *System and Methods of Creative Art*, "All the spiritual and physical nature of the actor must be centred on what is taking place in the soul of the person he is representing onstage." 21.

first entrance that the actor assumes what Stanislavski called "the magic *if*." The great actors allowed themselves time for these preparations.⁸

For the basis of his system and the language with which to articulate it, Stanislavski drew upon several sources. For example, he studied the performances, statements, and ideas of actors such as Tommaso Salvini and M. S. Shchepkin, whose practice he admired.⁹ And, even though he was no scientist in the professional sense, he discovered and applied elementary laws of human psychology upon which he based his "psycho-technique."¹⁰ But the most important of his sources were his own experiences and the notebooks on them that he had kept diligently throughout his own acting career. As he wrote:

The basis for my system is formed by the laws of the organic nature of the actor which I have studied thoroughly in practice. Its chief merit is that there is nothing in it that I myself have invented or have not checked in practice. It is the natural result of my experiences of the stage over many years.¹¹

Thus Stanislavski locates the basis of his system in his theatrical formation. In this paper, however, I would like to suggest that Stanislavski's religious formation in the Russian Orthodox Church might also have been a source of ideas for his system.

It cannot be said that Konstantin Alexeyev (1863-1938), who would take the stage name "Stanislavski," grew up in the church. As the second son of a wealthy textile manufacturer and merchant, however, the Russian Orthodox Church was certainly a significant ingredient in

⁸ Magarshack, The remaining two are 4) that through exercises the actor could develop a feeling for truth; and 5) that this feeling for truth had to become a matter of habit so that the actor would not have to think about it. The "creative state of mind" could only be of use to the actor when it became normal, natural, and, in fact, the actor's only means of expression.

⁹ Magarshack, *Stanislavsky; A Life* 1.

¹⁰ Magarshack 27, Wiles 13.

¹¹ Magarshack 27.

"the full cup of life" from which young Konstantin drank.¹² Religion, art, and commerce were pillars of the culture. Icons hung everywhere on the walls of the Alexeyev house.¹³

The church is prominent in the collection of childhood memories. When his oldest brother fell in love with the daughter of a simple Russian merchant, Stanislavski writes, "we forced ourselves to go regularly to church; we arranged solemn services, invited the best church choirs and sang early mass in chorus ourselves."¹⁴ Holidays he remembers, began with church:

rising early (one must make the best of that); then there is the long period of standing, the tasty holy wafer. the winter sun warming us through the cupola and gilding the iconostasis, around us the people in their holiday best, loud singing, and before us a day full of joy.¹⁵

Priests appear frequently in Stanislavski's memory as common threads in the social fabric of Old Russia and, also, as the new Russia was about to be born. Following a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* in the days before the outbreak of the Third, (i.e. the Bolshevik Revolution), the spectators "left the theatre in silence," Stanislavski writes

¹² "We spent our youth in a Russia that was peaceful," he writes, "we drank from the full cup of life. The present generation has grown up amidst war, hunger, world catastrophe, mutual misunderstanding and hate." Stanislavski, *My Life In Art*, 564. The primary source of information about Stanislavski's experiences from his childhood in the 1860's and 70's through 1923 is his memoir *My Life In Art*. The problems with the editing and translation of this book into English have been well documented by Stanislavski's biographers David Magarshack and Jean Benedetti, as well as Eric Bentley, Laurence Senelick and others. In her very useful book *Stanislavsky In Focus*, Sharon M. Carnicke points out that the 1923 MAT tour to the United States had been a critical though not an economic success and that Stanislavski wrote *My Life In Art* as a money-making scheme at a time when both the MAT and he himself were in financial crises. (Carnicke 20.) Now sixty years old, in dire financial straits, and on an arduous tour in a country which was deeply and openly suspicious of his native land, Stanislavski began the process of setting down his experiences and theories for the benefit of himself and his family as well as for generations of actors to come. The memoir reveals his ever-present sense of the difference between the old Russia and the evolving Russia.

¹³ e.g. "In order that I may not change my mind it is necessary to make my decision binding with an oath. We take an icon from the wall, and I solemnly swear that I will be nothing but the director of a circus." *My Life In Art* 44.

¹⁴ Stanislavsky 25.

¹⁵ Stanislavski 39.

and who knows--perhaps many of them went straight to the barricades. Soon shooting began in the city. Hardly able to find cover, we made our way to our homes in the night. In the darkness I ran into a priest, and thought: "They are shooting there, and we are in duty bound to go, he to the church, I to the theatre. He to pray, I to create for those who seek respite."¹⁶

II

Anyone who attended regular masses in an Orthodox church would have been steeped in the concept of *kenosis*, a fundamental construct and traditional theme particularly in Russian Orthodox Christianity. According to Steven Cassedy, the term *kenosis* refers to the "emptying" suggested by Saint Paul in Philippians 2:7 where Christ is said to have emptied himself of divinity in order to assume the form of a servant.¹⁷

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit [Paul writes] but in humility
regard others as better than yourselves.
4 Let each of you look not to your interests, but to the interests of others.
5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human
likeness.

"In Russian theology," Cassedy writes, "[kenosis] serves as a sort of negative corollary to incarnation;" that is, in order to be incarnated as a human being, the Christ had first to empty himself of divinity. To be flesh, to be material, is thus to be distant from the divine.

As a term, "kenosis" was introduced into Russian theology, according to Cassedy, in the nineteenth century but religious historian G.P. Fedotov, traces the tradition of "kenoticism" in Russian orthodoxy to the time and theology of St. Theodosius, the founder of Russian

¹⁶ Stanislavski 554.

¹⁷ Steven Cassedy, *P. A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter* 95.

monasticism in Kiev in the eleventh century. Theodosius was the third saint canonized by the Russian Church and has become known as "the disciple of the humiliated Christ." For Theodosius, kenosis seems to have been a process that began with the incarnation, Christ's assumption of the form of the servant, and was completed on the cross where his humiliation was complete.

The Pauline image of emptying the self is, at least, an evocative one when we place it side by side with the complicated problem on which Stanislavski began to work in 1906; that is, how may an actor enter the creative state of mind at will. In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski envisions the actor's self as full: full of the preoccupations of daily life, full of pretensions, full of bad habits and the residue of other roles. It is, the actor's self that is both primary obstacle and, paradoxically, the primary resource. In *System and Methods of Creative Art*, Stanislavski prescribes "self-renunciation" as part of the process of transformation:

The first thing an actor must do on entering the rehearsal room is to shed all the ties that bind him to his private life. [...] There is only one difference between a good and a bad actor: the ability or inability to renounce his ego, to concentrate the whole of his attention on what is taking place in himself and those who are admitted to his circle, and the degree of the total bestowal of all his powers on the transient "now..."¹⁸

Having renounced ego, the actor, now in a state of calm, begins the work of giving life to the new self, the character to be created. Having "emptied the self," we may say, of those elements noxious to creativity, the actor begins the series of exercises -- relaxation, concentration, attention, imagination, etc. -- that will enable the actor to create the life of the human spirit of the role. Note that I do not say "a new self." Stanislavski does not seem ever to speak of the rebirth of a new self. Indeed he always wanted his actors to be themselves and to show themselves, but selves freed of the concerns of life outside the role and in the creative "mood." Not coincidentally, Stanislavski's second book (the English translation of which is *An Actor Prepares*) is entitled, in Russian, *An Actor's Work on Himself*.

¹⁸ Stanislavski, *System and Methods of Creative Art* 150-51.

A consideration of kenosis leads to other insights into Stanislavski's assumptions about theatre art. For example, in his essay on the Russian Orthodox theologian P.A. Florensky, "Florensky and the Celebration of Matter," Steven Cassedy explores the concept of kenosis as it relates to icons. Recall that Christ's incarnation required the emptying himself of divinity to take on the material form of a servant on earth.

The status of icons in the Eastern Church, Cassedy writes, is another example of the tradition status of matter in Orthodox theology. Icons are material objects bearing visual representations of various holy beings. The proper attitude [for the Russian Orthodox faithful] is one that stems from looking beyond the physical icon to something infinite and invisible that lies beyond it. The wood and paint are matter; our awareness of what the icon stands for, its infinite and invisible prototype, is the essential component of our experience of it. The material icon simply points to something that is entirely immaterial.¹⁹

For Stanislavski, the primary aim and achievement of theatre art was the creation of the life of the human spirit. One of the means whereby the actor could create such a life was the stage setting, the material objects on stage. Unlike Emile Zola and other Naturalists, who sought to reproduce copies of physical environments on stage, Stanislavski was only interested in the material set as a pathway to the immaterial. Like an icon, the set, made of wood, and paint, and fabric, points the actor to something that is entirely immaterial or spiritual. If the set, for whatever reason, was unable to stimulate the feelings of the actor, it was of relatively little use to Stanislavski.

Finally, a consideration of *kenosis* and the kenotic tradition leads us through the spiritual to the ethical. For St. Theodosius, according to George Fedotov, Christ's *kenosis*, which reached its climax on the cross, has its practical expression in three Christian virtues: poverty, humility, and love.²⁰ Reference to these virtues leads us back to Paul's letter to the Philippians: "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as

¹⁹ Cassedy 96.

²⁰ George P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievian Christianity [from] the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) 128.

better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your interests, but to the interests of others."

Recall that Stanislavski's acting theory is directed primarily to the self of the individual actor and the challenge for that actor of creating the life of the human spirit. But it is the nature of the theatre art that several actors on the stage simultaneously are creating lives simultaneously. Thus, the need for communication²¹ on stage among those actors is critical. Thus, once the actors had successfully focused concentration on themselves (and away from the audience) and were in the creative state, they had to convey or transmit their thoughts and feelings to others. This process involves transmission, awareness that the thoughts and feelings have been received by the partner, and finally being open to, and even evoking reciprocal thoughts from the other. This matrix of transactions of thoughts and feelings becomes the ensemble.

"Such a process of stage communication, says Stanislavski, is only possible if the actor succeeds in banishing all his own personal thoughts and feelings during the performance."²² This statement leads us back to kenosis, the emptying of the self, but also on to the reason for emptying: service to other actors and to theatre art itself.

Stanislavski invented the pseudo-scientific language of "ray emission" and "ray absorption" to describe the communication process, but religious language might have served him as well. For "humility" vis-à-vis one's partners and "love" are powerful facilitators of interpersonal communication and spiritual bonds that hold an ensemble in communion with one another.

By the time he was writing *My Life in Art* in 1923, the sixty-year-old Stanislavski had had personal experience with "poverty" as well. The revolution had transformed him overnight from a wealthy Muscovite to a pauper. As Sharon Carnicke writes, "once a dapper and elegantly dressed gentleman, Stanislavski now wore shabby clothes and a torn overcoat.

²¹ According to Sharon Carnicke's glossary in *Stanislavsky in Focus*, the Russian word for interaction among scene partners and between actors and audience suggests "communion," (and this is the translation that Elizabeth Hapgood Reynolds used in *The Actor Prepares*) "sharing," "interacting," "relating," "being in contact."

²² Magarshack 59.

When he reached Berlin, the first stop on that year's European tour, he stayed in his hotel from embarrassment.²³ In those days, the man who had once been the toast of the Moscow theatre, may well have had a sense that he had "emptied himself." Yet, he continued to think of himself as a servant, to his country and "to his heirs," to whom he could not will his labors, his quests, his losses, his disappointments, but "only the few grains of gold that it has taken me all my life to find. May the Lord aid me in this task!"

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²³ Carnicke 15.