INTRODUCTORY EDITORIAL

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POETICS AND PRAGMATICS: THE THEATRICAL DIALOGUE

Applying semiotics to the theatre is no easy undertaking. First of all analysis of the plot cannot be approached from the canonical point of view of the actantial schema without considerable modifications; the theatre, being by its very nature agonistic and conflictual, nearly always presents two or more such schemas. Secondly the actual theatrical practice makes use of two distinct sign systems, which, while they share some commonalities, diverge in other respects.

The theatre is not simply mime or merely a show, and neither is it just a performance or a dance – it is all these at once, plus language. Language – that which makes us humans and not animals. For this reason our analysis will mainly consist of an investigation of the dialogue, which seems to us the most fruitful starting-point in any theatrical enterprise – the dialogue as an interpersonal relation. Peculiar to the theatrical dialogue (as opposed to other “literary” forms of language, for example as seen in lyric works or prose fiction) is the way in which it demands a particular kind of reading, one based on what one might consider a natural or “savage” semiology – that of the reader who constructs an imaginary representation aided by signs produced by the dialogue, a semiology which is essentially that of the actor whose craft springs from this kind of “savage analysis.” Upon what methodological procedures can such an analysis be based?
The Theatrical Relation

1. The theatrical dialogue appears as a mime of “possible” words, of “real-life” exchanges, but it is also a second text (in Bakhtine’s terms), an artefact, and as such, an aesthetic object which requires of the spectator an aesthetic perception. Theatre dialogue is thus understood not only as an exchange between two or more voices, but as a poem – both as a medium portraying ideas and emotions and as a productive fusion of images and sounds lending itself to a poetic analysis.

2. The theatrical dialogue is a succession of conversational exchanges dependent upon linguistic enunciation, which is to say “the transformation of language into actual performance by an individual act of usage.”

3. Language in the theatre is active. Every utterance (each line a character says) not only has meaning, but constitutes action, and modifies the situation of communication. The essential element of theatrical utterances is thus the language act it produces, which affects all subsequent dialogue. This implies both that theatrical dialogue is not simply conversation, but the creation of action, and therefore that the analysis of dialogue must be first and foremost the determination of a series of language acts. An examination of theatrical dialogue is therefore predicated upon the employment of pragmatics, or in other words the analysis of the conditions and situational functioning of communication. This will rely not only on the examination of the series of language acts in question, but also on the contracts which permit and sustain the dialogue exchange.

4. The functioning of theatrical communication is particularly complex for the reason that these interpersonal exchanges between characters are not the only ones at hand. The theatrical dialogue is twofold, being articulated not only between speaker $x$ and speaker $y$ (or others still) but at the same time between all of these roles and a second class of addressee, the spectator. Analysis must therefore take stock of the textual marks of this hidden presence, the virtual addressee, both in such forms as the soliloquy or chorus and within the actual dialogue.

In addition to the fact that the reception of the dialogue utterance is doubly-structured, we find that its production is as well: when the spectator present at the performance sees/hears two characters in dialogue, he or she is in fact witnessing two forms of enunciation: behind the charac-
What is more, theatrical writing, by definition, is dependent on the public it is intended to address in the most immediate sense. Writing for the theatre is a production in the immediate and for the immediate, and admits no suffrage to posteriority. But to write for the people of the present supposes the possibility of hearing them, listening to their questions, their requirements. All theatre texts are a response to the needs of the present spectator: we can therefore say quite correctly that the instance of reception is indeed present at the very moment of writing. Yet this “requirement” of the public is the object of an historical inquiry: it is one of the ways in which this historicity meets semiotics.

Theatrical Enunciation

From the initial point of view of writing, certain constraints are imposed by the theatrical form:

1. The writing of theatrical language is restricted to the present tense. Though the play itself may be in the past, the verbs must respect the system of the current day with respect to their writing: enunciation is both personal and current, which excludes, for example, the use of the preterite in modern French, such that anything written for current ears must be uttered by present tongues even if the act in question is of another time. Any instance in which this rule is not respected takes on meaning precisely in terms of the breach.

2. The crucial analysis is that of deixis, the net vector of all these empty signs which are so many shifts or clutches; these are the adverbs of time and place which locate the speech situation, demonstrative pronouns and articles indicating the rapport between persons and objects and, especially, the personal pronouns which set not only the relationships between the speakers, but between a given speaker and the world, in short the character’s identity – with the play advancing and evolving.
these rapports. For example: the confidantes in neo-classical French theatre never say “I” – except the nurse, OEnone, in Racine’s Phaedra, where it refers to a different aspect of the character.

3. A principle task for most theatrical writings is to determine the idiolect of the characters; it is indeed fascinating and difficult to establish which peculiarities of vocabulary and syntax characterise the individual language use of each subject. This task is a crossroads, then, of linguistics and stylistics. Thus the idiolect of Alceste in Molière’s Misanthrope, which bears the marks of a certain archaism reflecting the character’s bent toward some past era, also shows signs of aggressiveness – swear-words, invectives and exclaims. The analysis of the idiolects penetrates the characters’ individuality with more clarity and pertinence than any conjectural psychological reconstruction could offer.

Saying Without Saying: The Laws of Conversation

Here we will speak of thematics only in passing remembrance to all that which, seen traditionally, springs from the content of a play. These matters are not central to our task at hand, so we shall content ourselves with a look at the laws and conditions of exchange.

We know that verbal exchange is governed by the implicit laws formalised by Paul Grice (1974, Logic and Conversation), whose principal rules are: the law of quantity, by which a speaker is required to provide the interlocutor with the needed amount of information – no more and no less; the law of quality (“let your contribution be true!”) which, a fundamental and little-understood law of communication, supposes that a human being always tells the truth, and without which no relations are possible; the category of modality, which could be formulated as follows “be clear,” or as “eschew ambiguity in your speech.”

In addition to this we must add the entire series of unpredictable laws which depend on the customs and mores of a given society, and which, despite their variability, obey two fundamental rules (see Erving Goffman, Les rites d’interaction): do not “hit” the positive face of your interlocutor, which means do not insult him, and secondly, do not touch his negative face (do not step on his toes, do not invade his territory).
Yet it is characteristic of theatre dialogue constantly to violate these laws, flagrantly, and in so doing, to create new meaning. Such breaches exist in conversation, but in general they are rare and often involuntary. In theatre, they are deliberate and are done precisely to be seen: in this way the scene of exposition violates the law of quantity, and lies, breaking the law of quality, are meant to be perceived and understood by the spectator. Such are the lies of Iago in *Othello*, as well as the innocent but telling lies of lovers in Marivaux. Regarding ambiguities and the like, theatre dialogue frequently allows them, further abusing the law of quality, to the point of being a source of considerable pleasure for the audience: this is what occurs in the enigma which leaves an interlocutor confounded, and which calls on the intelligence of the spectator. Here, as in other cases, the interpersonal exchange presupposes that the “third” addressee, the spectator, is unable to modify the situation of enunciation, but is present to hear it. One source of effect on the spectator, whether comic or tragic, is the violation of conversational laws. Here we see once again how it is the job of the scene to supply sense to the dialogue, by underlining or erasing relational impertinence.

The Implicit

The presence of conversational laws shows the importance in theatre language analysis of the domain of the implicit. This is primarily the realm of the conditions of enunciation. Certain of these are explicit: the words of a prisoner are of the prison. The words of the criminal (such as *Macbeth* or *Othello*) upon committing a murder are also explicit with respect to the conditions of enunciation. The majority, however, belong to the implicit. Language acts cannot take place independently of anterior conditions, including previous language use as well as all that which must be supposed for an utterance to have meaning.

This is the reason the implicit is so important: presuppositions and connotations give the theatrical text its nourishment. A presupposition is a piece of information which an utterance implies and which, despite not being formulated as a separate proposition is necessary for the utterance to be understood. The peculiarity of the presupposition is that whether the principal utterance is an affirmation or a denial, whether it is modalised in the interrogative or some other mode, the presupposition...
persists. For example the utterance “my neighbour is ill” presupposes “I have a neighbour.” Whatever fate the utterance is subjected to, the existence of the neighbour cannot be suppressed from a place somewhere in the background. This is a factual presupposition. The logical presupposition is that which, for example, being the cause of an event, must have preceded it. Then there are ideological ones, whose analysis is still more tenuous.

One could not understand Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* without a series of such presuppositions: factually, we have the existence of a feudal war involving Duncan and his heirs; logically, we see it is impossible to foresee largely aleatory historical events; ideologically, we must presuppose a certain respect and reverence of the monarch and the principles of monarchy, as well as a belief in supernatural forces and events such as divination. The phenomenon of the implicitly understood includes the baggage of allusions that the speakers, but also the spectator, hear, whether said or not. This baggage seems virtually infinite, and around it an entire dimension of play develops the psychological portraits of the characters upon which the spectator will determine their motives and intentions. The play in this sense is the business of the director and actors.

The Spectator’s Part

What the spectator hears is intended to be heard – yet the characters’ words are, primarily, directed at each other: whether they speak to express their feelings or to comment on politics, everything they say is addressed to another, who is the primary receptor. The spectator, by virtue of a communicational trope, is second, and thus additional.

There are, however, two domains in which reception belongs only to the spectator: these are the domains of the poetic and the perlocutory. The perlocutory, whether tragic or comic, is the effect of the theatrical enunciation as a whole on the spectator. The poetic is the product of a textual and scenic craft which creates, through signs, a second, artistic language. But if we allow ourselves to speak of the poetics of the theatre, this is because the theatre demands the spectator not only listen to the dialogue, and apprehend its conceptual and emotional messages, but also that he conjure his imagination into action. Whatever the merits of visual
scenographic construction may be, the dialogue recounts something one cannot see, which is the entire extra-scenic time and space: such scenes are never shown – the Caesars’ Rome, the Crete of Phaedra, the seashore where Hippolyte perishes, the Japan of Rodrigue’s memory in Claudel’s Soulier de Satin, the ruins of Troy: “I see only the towers that the ashes have covered,” says Pyrrhus in Andromaque. And the spectator’s imagination conjures Hiroshima. Imagination, indeed, but not only imagination: imagination and memory, as we shall see. In addition to this is the truly aesthetic perception of the signifier. And in Combat de Nègres et de Chiens, the suffocating, smothering Africa of Koltès is presented to us purely through language, as is the mansard in Genet’s les Bonnes, like the livid no-man’s-land that Clov examines through the ceiling window in Beckett’s Fin de Partie.

The Poetic

As Roman Jakobson defines the poetic, “the emphasis put on the message for its own sake, [...] the function which stresses the palpable side of signs, thus deepening the fundamental dichotomy between signs and objects.” This dichotomy is redoubled in the theatre by another: it is paradoxical to stress the poetic function in a literary language defined in terms of communicational functions. We must constantly examine both the poetic and the communicational. An analysis focussing on the poetic goes beyond looking at dialogue as mere lines or utterances and takes the text as a whole to be examined as such. But, paradoxically, understanding the essentials of the poetic in the theatre requires a focus on the moment in the total discourse.

Question: what can we glean from the poetic in theatre? Is it possible to apprehend the detail in poetic expression by examining aspects of time in the performance, when theatrical performance is limited inherently to the single dimension of the present? The answer is yes and no. No because one cannot seize everything in the “blink of an ear.” But yes, also, insofar as unconscious and subconscious apprehension operates intensely during perception of the performance in a manner similar to examples in everyday life. What operates in theatre is not only subliminal perception, but also memory – the capacity to recall “similar” events which occurred previously, but also phonic memory whose recall ensures the metaphoric
relationships between diverse elements, analogous to the musical leitmotif.

The Poetic Moment

While poetic expression is sown everywhere throughout a great theatre text, there are certain special moments. Suddenly one perceives something different, a crystallisation allows us to hear the message as such, in terms of its signifier. In such an event it is the enunciation which has changed – its interpersonal dimension has weakened. The poetic is both a signal and a sign. The spectator is told by a change in the writing, such as moving from prose to verse, or the multiplication of tropes, the emergence of traditionally poetic themes, a distancing from the dramatic situation itself, to the mythical universe, as though the speaker ceased to appreciate urgency, ignoring the need to address others. What we see at such times is the voice of the writer, rather than that of the speaker, directly addressing the spectator.

Poetic writing is characterised throughout the theatre text as the multiplication of tropes. Indeed tropes and rhetorical figures of speech find their rightful place in any literary text, but metaphor in theatre has a peculiar role – due both to the fact that theatrical language not only bears meaning (like poetic ornaments) but also realises action (as poetic tools), and the fact that the fundamental means by which the poetic functions, namely parallelism and repetition, have a special importance in theatre that we can attribute to the perception of the play as a whole by virtue of memory’s active role.

In addition, there is a kind of phonic poetics which functions on the level of the audible signs: here we are dealing first and foremost with phonemes, and with their meaning and effect, and next with lexemes, and their recurrences and parallelisms, the rhythm which engages the diverse structural modes of sound organisation of words, and of their versification. It is interesting to consider the way in which these three elements cooperate in the explicitation of such effects as rhyme and assonance.
The Structures of the Poetic

We have been examining poetic moments: while the poetic is dispersed through the entire length of the text, there are, again, privileged instants, moments where organised “images” are constructed, where scenarios tell a story or paint a picture (hypotyposis).

Micro-scenarios are a kind of image that the spectator is called upon to construct without the aid of visual stimuli. This includes everything the language of the character brings to life: meditations on the future, references to an epic fable and so on. This image constructed without physical data has in fact got the entire theatre for its support, and is nourished by all the stage’s cumulative ephemeral signs: thus it is at its strongest at the ends of plays. That is what accounts for the exponential growth of this poetic energy; and so it is with the tales of murder or violent death at the conclusion of classical and neo-classical tragedies. The conjuring up of the spectator’s memory actually plays the decisive and fateful role. Which explains the possibility of cataphoric and anaphoric projections which enrich the audience’s perceptions. These projections allow the member of the public to remain free from the closed system of immediate perception in the present, and in so doing to join the visual and imaginary universes.

Such micro-scenarios can be seen for example in Fin de Partie, the epic tale, the “Roman de Hamm ou le voyage de noces des parents en Italie,” the best example, the wonderfully ambiguous story of the blind painter; and in Genet’s Les Bonnes, it is seen in the maids’ writing of the anonymous letter.

Hypotyposis is also removed a certain distance from the immediacy of the action and plot. According to Quintilian, it may be defined as a “figure of style consisting of a description of a scene which is so lively and energetic and so clearly seen that it springs to life in the eyes with the colours, relief and presence of reality.” This “image” created by the very words of the characters constitutes a window opening onto an “elsewhere” belonging to history or to the natural world. Every hypotyposis acts in two dimensions: firstly it presents the spectator with a riddle – the question not only of its meaning, but of its reason for existence; and secondly it demands to be perceived in its own right, like a diminishing of the text itself into disappearance; it asks to be apprehended in its full poetic and musical dimensions – it goes without saying that it demands the
full participation of the actor. Paul Claudel is the hypotyposis-writer par excellence; in his works it plays the decisive role, both poetically and metaphysically: to present the world in the enormous and objective dimensions of its divine creation.

The world in which the hypotyposis is enunciated is peculiar: it appears to cause the characters’ “I” language to illustrate a certain world view. But at the same time it acts as the “I” expression of the writer (because it displaces interpersonal enunciation). It is not difficult to see Claudel’s religious philosophy in his hypotyposis, and in Hugo, the author’s semi-autobiographical story. Hypotyposis goes beyond the boundaries of contradiction: at once presence and absence, real and imaginary, so-and-so’s personal expression and at the same time that of someone else – in essence a mediating phenomenon.

To conclude this examination of the poetic, we will say that it is necessary to treat the poetic dimensions of discourse as an autonomous whole, which can appear as an opposition to – or a variation of, or a complement to – the explicit senses which they clearly enrich to an extraordinary degree. Ultimately, in the greatest dramatic writers the poetic dimension constitutes a signal and an index of emotion. A final example is the famous verse uttered by Antiochus in Racine’s Bérénice: “Dans l’Orient désert, quel devint mon ennui.” Here Antiochus has just delivered news of the death of the last bastion of defenders at Jerusalem: if the Orient is deserted, everyone is dead. But the poetic dimension of the verse (which includes the phonic) also speaks of the isolation of Antiochus in light of the absence of Bérénice, who abandoned him, and the two solitudes come to symbolise one another: the desert of death, and that of love.

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In conclusion: these pages are no more than a modest prelude to applied work in theatre; the rich and fruitful task of the journal *Applied Semiotics / Sémiotique appliquée* is to give this work body and substance.

Anne Übersfeld, March 1997 [Translated by The Editors]