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THE SYSTEMIC POTENTIAL OF A DRAMATIC TEXT AS THEATRICAL CODEX

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The opinion that the nature of drama has not been yet determined in theoretical terms¹ seems to be supported by the prevalent critical tendency not to recognize the difference between a dramatical text and its performance of performances.

In his book *Drama. An Introduction* G. J. Watson² starts the first chapter on *The Nature of Drama* with a statement: "There are almost as many definitions of drama as there are critics of it" (p. 1) and proceeds with citing what he calls representative remarks, for instance, that of G. B. Tennyson: "Drama is a story that people act out on a stage before spectators" – a suggestion, in which drama is viewed exclusively as a theatrical event. Marjorie Boulton offers a modified view: "A play is not really a piece of literature for reading – ... – it is literature that walks and talks before our eyes" which is a beautiful metaphor perhaps, but theoretically not fully satisfying, either.

And Watson himself seems not consistent enough: on p. 2 he defines drama as the "representation of carefully selected actions by living people on a stage in front of an audience", once more adopting a theatrical perspective only, while on p. 18 he attempts a different statement: "A play is something that exists in a study or a library, and something which achieves its fullest life on the stage..." In spite of the usage of the undetermined notion of "something", it seems that Watson is here closest to truth, especially when he asserts: "The crucial point is to realize that drama is a hybrid art form".

¹ See the discussion of a theoretical controversy in: A. Zgorzelski, *Drama as an opposition of functions* (on the example of W. B. Yeats's "A Full Moon in March"), (in:) *Studies on Drama, Zeszyty Naukowe Wyd. Humanistycznego*, Filologia angielska 6, Gdańsk 1985, Uniwersytet Gdański, pp. 77–79. Cf. also H. Markiewicz, *Dramat a teatr w polskich dyskusjach teoretycznych*, (in:) *Świadomość literatury. Rozprawy i szkice*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 159–179 (first published in "Dialog" 1982, nr 2).

² G. J. Watson, *Drama. An Introduction*, London and Basing-stoke 1983, Macmillan.

A closer observation of this elusive hybrid nature is not in order.

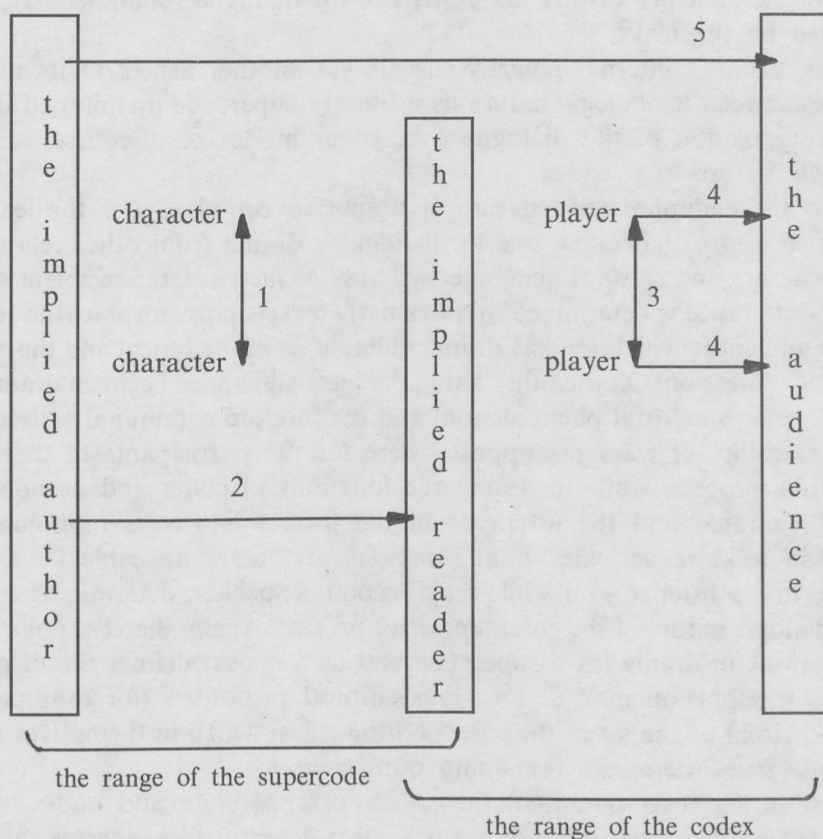
First, a drama, being a literary text — and in the same way as a poem or a novel — manifests itself first as a record of a unique utterance of the implied author who builds his own individual *supercode* from the linguistic material in order to communicate his particular vision of the world. But secondly — in opposition to this literary function and in the retrogressive perspective of theatrical performances — drama reveals itself as a *codex*: a primary script generating subsequent cultural utterances. Hence it functions not only as a unique message in literary idiolect (a supercode), but also as a text which is meant to find its final realization in each of the theatrical interpretations it generates.

These two functions are diametrically opposed: the utterance draws attention to its unique fulfilment and simultaneously undermines its own finality. Being a syntagma of its own supercode — drama at the same time “expects” its stage enactment and functions similarly to a sign-system or a code generating many cultural utterances as its own syntagmata.

Modifying Jakobsonian terminology, one could say perhaps that drama is dominated not only by the *poetic* function, but also by the canonically *metasystemic* one: instead of explaining unknown elements of a language, as in the metalingual function, it establishes itself as a new sign-system, a new code. This new system functions simultaneously with the supercode: a drama may be viewed as a paradigm realized *only in one* literary utterance (supercode), and — at the same time — as a paradigm which establishes rules of its realization in *many* cultural (theatrical) messages. While the existence of the supercode is a necessary condition for the text being a literary utterance, the opposition of the supercode function to that of the codex may be met with only in a drama. As we see, drama is marked by two paradigmatic orders (a literary supercode and a theatrical codex) while realizing only one of them in the text itself.

We understand a supercode as a kind of idiolect enabling contact with an *individual recipient* in the process of *reading*. In contradistinction to a supercode, a codex presupposes contact with many spectators in the process of a *performance*. Drama, combining the functions of supercode and codex, proposes at the same time individual contact in reading, and models collective contact in performances. In consequence it seems to constitute and programme an unexpected number of simultaneous communicative processes. First, functioning as a literary supercode, drama presents a dialogue, a communicative process between the characters. Second, the arrangement of the characters' utterances, their semantic potential, their building up into sequences and the relationships between them all contribute to the text as the implied author's utterance directed to the recipient, i.e. to the implied reader. Thus the text may be considered in the perspective of the communicative process of reading. Moreover, in its function as a codex, drama reveals yet two other levels on which the particular utterances of the players function simultaneously: each utterance is addressed both to the partner on the stage

and to the audience. These third and fourth communicative processes occur respectively in the scenic reality and in the theatrical one. However, all the performers' utterances considered as a structural whole, both in their semantics and arrangement constitute the implied author's utterance directed also to the audience. This is the fifth potential process of communication presupposed by the dramatic text. As the following diagram shows, two of these processes clearly result from drama's being a literary supercode (1, 2), and the remaining three from its function as a codex (3, 4, 5):



Closer analysis of the diagram reveals that drama is a *dialogic* phenomenon only in the sphere of two (out of five) potential communicative processes (1 and 3). Furthermore, one of these two (3) is but a consequence of the text-inscribed dialogue between characters — determined by the rules of the supercode, it is only secondary within the codex phenomena. Hence, it turns out that drama is dialogic predominantly in its function as supercode (process nr 1), while in its

function as codex it appears monologic in nature (process nr 4). In other words, a codex cannot determine a dialogue between the actor and the spectator³. Even if we find an implied "response" of the viewer in a given drama, it functions only in the supercode potential of the text, increasing the number of the speakers that exist in the fictional world, within the spatiotemporal bounds of the presented universe and not in the theatrical reality — it simply results in a further stratification of the literary reality to be staged. When it comes to staging practice, a director usually has to cast one more actor in such a role in order to introduce the "response" onto the stage, because there is little chance, if any, of the audience's really taking part in the dialogue spontaneously, as is suggested by the text⁴.

Thus, drama's internal polarity reveals yet another aspect of its unique tension: between its *dialogic* nature as a literary supercode (manifested in the dominant position of the dialogue over other modes of discourse) and its *monologic* nature as a codex.

With the communicative nature of drama so complex, it is the features mentioned above that allow one to distinguish drama from other related or similar literary and cultural phenomena. Thus, for instance, the recipient of the author's utterance is determined in a dramatic text as polymorphic (the reader and the audience), which renders drama different from the lyrical and the epical modes of expression. On the other hand, the basic difference between drama (or the theatre as a cultural phenomenon) and the folklore communal activities is the invariability of roles presupposed here for the participants of the communicative process: while in drama the functions of coder and decoder are always separated and the utterance of the former is always monologic in nature, in folklore activities both functions are interchangeable — a participant, first a listener, in a while may become a speaker, determining in this way a dialogic nature of the communicative process. Again, the very polarity of the functions in drama (as a supercode and as a codex) defines the disparity between this phenomenon and various cultural prototexts (for example the recorded ritual or the set of the letter-writing rules) which in themselves never constitute true utterances, remaining pure codices.

Each of the two paradigmatic orders of supercode and codex which underlie the internal tension of a dramatic text determines a separate range of questions to be asked by the scholar. While examining the rules of the supercode, he can observe the semantic range of signs, consider the created fields of association, discover particular principles governing the linking of

³ Having noted the effects of the monologic and "one-way" nature of the codex in theatrical practice, G. Mounin comes to the conclusion that there is no communication in the theatre. For the refutation of his views see: I. Sławińska, *Współczesna refleksja o teatrze*, Kraków 1979, Wyd. Literackie, pp. 239–241.

⁴ Obviously this does not mean that during a particular performance (i.e. a theatrical phenomenon) a dialogue between the stage and the auditorium cannot take place (cf. K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London and New York 1983, Methuen, pp. 38, 95–97). Such a phenomenon cannot occur, however, in a drama.

signs into an individual utterance, detect the literary tradition behind those principles or analyze the syntagmatic rhetoric responsible for the unique shape of the text.

When determining the codex function, the observer may investigate the relationships between the created world model and the presupposed model of theatrical reality, that is — for instance — the relative status of the actor and the spectator and the character and the actor, the signals differentiating or identifying time-space continua of the stage and of the audience, the inflexibility with which the codex determines the performance. This would help to expose the general sense of all these relationship, the sense rooted in the tradition of theatrical and stage conventions. In effect, the observation should reveal the communicative situation assumed in the codex, a certain type of cultural experience projected by the codex into the performance.

2

The necessity of ensuring multi-level communication invests the category of the speaker in drama with exceptional power and importance. While in fiction its epical character is determined by the existence of the narrator and in lyrical poetry the most essential category is the lyrical “ego”, the dramatic text — especially in its codex function — manifests the dominance of *te performer*⁵. The variety of roles ascribed to the performer seems not only to determine the status of the audience but also to define various models of performance — each performance being a separate communicative and cultural phenomenon — and to propose different concepts of theatrical reality. And it is exactly in the changes within those aspects of the text that the systematic potential of drama as a theatrical codex reveals its spectrum and range. A closer observation of this range is now in order.

One of the possible functions of the performer is the role of an *interpreter* reciting the text. His primary task is then merely to utter the text, subjecting it to his own interpretation concerning stress, intonation, loudness and speed. Thus the main aim of the performance becomes a realization of the sound potential of the text. It seems obvious that the status of the audience is immediately determined here as that of *listeners* or auditors. Such are the roles of the performer and the audience suggested, for instance, by the chorus's utterances in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* or by the contemplative and meditative nature of characters' dialogue in Karol Wojtyła's dramas. It also seems highly probable that it will be the dominant codex presupposition in the so called “poetic drama” — hence we might expect its frequent occurrence in the dramatical works of the Romantic epoch.

⁵ The significance of this category in literature has been recognized by J. Ziomek. Cf. his study *Projekt wykonawcy w dziele literackim a problemy genealogiczne* (in:) *Problemy odbioru i odbiorcy*, T. Budzyński, J. Sławiński, eds., Wrocław 1977, pp. 71–92 (rpt. in: J. Ziomek, *Powinowactwa fabuły*, Warszawa 1980, PWN, pp. 102–132).

The vision of the theatre beyond such functions and tasks of the performer and of the audience could be defined as the concept of *word theatre* in which it is the text itself that stays in the centre of attention and where the performance takes — according to the codex — the form of *recitation*. The codex also predetermines a twofold cultural function of the performance in relation to the audience. Firstly, it is to help the listener visualize the fictional world of a drama, which at times may be extremely difficult to stage, as is the case, for example, with poetic drama. Secondly, it is to vivify, through public uttering, most abstract spheres of meditation or reflection and to render them more concrete through the interpretative power of the performer's skill, thus engraving them in audience's memory. Such a function might be called *eidotropic*⁶.

Another task of the performer that may be assigned by the codex is not only to recite the text, but also, and perhaps primarily, to enact the situations there implied, i.e. to work them out in space and to develop them temporally in action. The performer acquires the status of *actor*⁷ in the full sense of the word (Lat. *actor, -oris*): he is the doer, the originator of what is meant to happen in the codex-determined scenic reality and of what is to be physically perceived by the audience. The audience thus become *spectators*, observes of the occurring events. Such roles for the two categories seem to dominate in all dramas characterized by vivid action, especially in those approaching farce. While continuing the tradition of pageantry, the historical drama also tends in this direction with its dazzling lavishness of costume and stage setting. It is also the tendency that manifests itself in the twentieth century "well-made plays" as well as in some contemporary pieces of monumental design, such as *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* by Peter Shaffer.

The type of performance predetermined by the kind of codex outlined above might be called *spectacle*, where movement and setting determine the spatial organization of the stage and physical action with abundant details of costume and stage property irresistibly draw the audience's attention. In other words, while recitation realizes the sound potential of the drama, spectacle offers the realization of the text-implied potential of space and movement. The concept of the theatre which underlies such codes presuppositions is obviously the concept of *show theatre*, the theatre of action demanding the realization of the dramatic text primarily in the kinetic and proxemic codes.

⁶ The term would suggest the capability of experiencing images — both recollected and created impromptu by one's own mind — as vividly as normal perceptive impressions, and of storing these images in one's mind with photographic precision for longer periods.

⁷ Most of the terms used in the present essay (such as, for example, actor and performer, spectators and audience) appear in earlier publications, especially in popular criticism, as totally synonymous and interchangeable. However, as the present study aims at a greater precision of description. I will use these words as terms whose fields of association should be seen as clearly discrete. I do realize that this choice of mine stands in conflict with common usage, but I see no other solution, the more so that there are no really appropriate names for many of the phenomena discussed here. Cf. J. Ziomek's analysis of the term "performer" (*op. cit.*, p. 79).

The cultural function of the performance in relation to the audience is here, according to the codex, the multiform display of world space, which is meant to provoke amazement at reality's abundance in details and at its temporal changeability. In view of the dominating cognitive importance of observation of the world in such a type of drama, this function might be called a *gnoseotropic* one.

Sometimes the task of an individual performer may be more precisely specified in this or in other types of codex presuppositions. And thus, for instance, one of the performers may be ascribed the role of a narrator, or of a commentator, of a "dance leader", of a compere or simply of a quasideirector of the production. Such a role is always endowed with a distance towards the scenic reality greater than other parts: the player functions, as it were, on an additional world level in between the scenic universe and the reality of the audience. However, as such a device concerns usually a unique and exceptional role of only *one* of the performers, it cannot modify the status of the audience presupposed by a drama as a whole. And it does not entail a wholly different nature of the performance; it often merely assists the spectator in his attempts to interpret the world presented on stage by influencing his opinions and judgements (especially the ones concerning the relationships of the world on stage and his own reality). In some cases this device may result in superimposing additional autothematic meanings upon the actors' activities⁸.

The third task that the codex may lay before the performer is to impersonate the hero of a drama and to participate in the action connected with the psychological sphere of interpersonal relationships rather than with the parameters of the scenic space. The player becomes here an "impostor", a true *stage character*, and his aim is primarily to disclose this character's feelings and thinking processes. Hence, the audience do not concentrate on the observation of events, but on watching the character's internal life and his psyche, the connoisseurs among them admiring the *imitator's* power of incarnation. Thus, the audience acquire the status of hidden *witnesses*, the *voyeurs*⁹ of internal action, of heart and mind movements.

These codex presuppositions seem to dominate the most famous dramatical pieces, as for instance Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be" — to name but one. Drama following the tradition established by Chekhov's *The Cherry*

⁸ It seems that such devices may often be the result of a close interdependence and mutual interconditioning between the given codex and *theatrical* conventions. The codex of the show theatre tradition, for instance, when combined with the theatrical convention of cabaret may establish the dominant role of the compere and determine the fragmentary construction of the performance, thus fracturing the presentation of the fictional world into a number of "turns" and endowing the whole show with a clear tendency towards entertainment. The question arises here to what extent theatrical conventions can affect similar tendencies in a dramatical codex. The answer to this question would require a historically oriented in-depth study of different stages in the coexistence of an interaction between drama, theatre and folklore.

⁹ The term is prompted by of R. Scholes's analyses in his *Semiotics and Interpretation*, New Haven and London 1982, Yale University Press, pp. 78–79.

Orchard, Ibsen's *Nora*, and by the texts of Strinberg, is also characterized by the above type of presuppositions. Since criticism recognizes such texts as simply "dramas" or "plays", we could apply an equally imprecise term of *demonstrations* to the kind of performance they generate. A codex of this type clearly discloses the underlying vision of the *psychological theatre*. This vision together with the inscribed status of the player determine the function of the performance in relation to the audience as the *synaesthetic* one¹⁰: it is designed to make the recipient share with the character his emotional experience, participate in his decisions and in their psychological consequences and thus realize the anthropocentric, the "personal" potential of a dramatic text.

The fourth, and last, task that the codex may assign the performer is to represent the audience at a meeting devoted not to the stage production of a text, but to the common participation in a para-religious service. The ritual of the service — i.e. the code realized during the meeting — is nothing else but the text of a drama. In this case the communication between the stage and the auditorium takes place only to a minor degree, as the borderline between the two kinds of space becomes blurred. Here, what the performer aims at is not so much informing the audience about various relationships existing in the fictional world, but rather at carrying out the actions that would stimulate certain practical effects in the universe encompassing both the stage and the auditorium. This happens not only when the performer is to take part in the events on the stage, but also when he is to utter the text, especially lines directly concerning the action. All the persons present at the performance become one *community*, like the members of a congregation. The words spoken on the stage are to the uttered by their *deputy*, by the spokesman of that congregation (*émissaire*), who thus performs the function of the *agent* of the audience. It is because of his activity, both through his behaviour and through his acts of speaking, that all the others may participate *per procura* in the *mystery* performed, in the actions sustaining the present shape of the universe or changing it in the direction desirable for the community.

The suppositions described here can be easily spotted in many texts of medieval drama, though they permeate a number of contemporary dramatic works, too. The less familiar, later pieces by W. B. Yeats¹¹ may serve as examples here. These codex presuppositions, requiring the realization of the perlocutionary potential of the text¹², reveal the vision of the *ritual*

¹⁰ The Greek *syn-* = „together”, and *aisthesis* = “feeling”, “sensing”.

¹¹ Cf. A. Zgorzelski, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–88.

¹² The term “perlocution” is used here in the sense which seem to be at variance with the one accepted in modern speech acts theory. Viewing the perlocutionary act as the activity performed through uttering, John R. Searle, for instance, tends to recognize it in dependence of its *effect* in the *response* of the recipient of the *message* (cf. the clear and concise survey of contemporary views in K. Elam, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–159). I would, however, prefer to link the phenomenon of perlocution with the nature of the utterance itself whose primary function is *not to inform*, but to change the surrounding reality solely by the power of uttering. Thus, typical perlocutionary act would be, for example, an utterance like “open, Sesame”, or, as Austin proposes, “I take thee... for my wedded wife”, rather than a message trying to convince somebody of something.

*theatre*¹³, where the performance is to fulfil a *prakseotropic* function in relation to the audience, as its aim is to produce later in everyday reality certain practical effects for those who participate in such a theatrical rite.

The systemic potential of the drama as a codex that we have outlined above can be presented in a more concise way in the following table⁺:

	the status of the performer	the status of the audience	the status of the performance	the function of the performance	the concept of the theatre
1	interpreter	listeners	recitation	eidotropic	word theatre
2	actor	spectators	spectacle	gnoseotropic	show theatre
3	imitator, stage character	witnesses, voyeurs	demonstration	synaesthetic	psychological theatre
4	deputy, agent, spokesman	community, congregation	mystery, rite, parareligious service	prakseotropis	ritual theatre

3

The range of the systemic potential of a codex, embracing only four types of a performance (recitation, spectacle, demonstration and mystery), may seem at first sight a scanty and negligible one. It should be remembered, however, that the above differentiated categories suggest simply some generalized and abstract tendencies which are rarely revealed as dominating a dramatic text in its entirety, most often governing only some particular parts of it. In consequence, an individual drama manifests itself usually as a hybrid of those tendencies varying their combination as well as their textual significance. A particular fusion of those categories, with their unpredictable ratio to each other and their variable mutual conditioning, cannot be easily explained unless observed in broad historical perspectives, in strict connection with both dramatic and theatrical tradition.

Moreover, one must not forget that the systemic potential of a codex is superimposed, as it were additionally, upon various systemic possibilities of a dramatic literary supercode. It is only through the interdependence and integration of the two potentials that the full richness of dramatical conventions comes into existence.

¹³ This type of codex is closest to the prototexts of the recorded ritual, like for example *Ordo Missae*.

SYSTEMOWA POTENCJA DRAMATU JAKO KODEKSU TEATRALNEGO

STRESZCZENIE

Dramat jest rozumiany tutaj jako opozycja dwóch funkcji — literackiego superkodu i teatralnego kodeksu. Jako paradygmat realizowany tylko w jednym tekście literackim, superkod umożliwia kontakt w procesie lektury odbiorcy indywidualnemu, podczas gdy kodeks — ustalając prawa własnej realizacji w wielu przedstawieniach teatralnych — zakłada kontakt zbiorowości widzów w trakcie inscenizacji. W rezultacie tekst dramatyczny generuje, jak się wydaje, pięć procesów komunikacyjnych (diagram 1) i ujawnia wewnętrzne spolaryzowanie pomiędzy swą dialogiczną naturą jako superkodu i monologiczną naturą jako kodeksu. Podstawową kategorią podmiotu wypowiadającego ukazuje się natomiast w dramacie kategoria wykonawcy.

Kategorii tej mogą zostać przypisane cztery zasadnicze funkcje: a) interpretatora, który realizuje brzemieniową potencję tekstu, b) aktora, który ucieleśnia implikowaną w tekście potencję ruchu i przestrzeni, c) imitatora, który ujawnia „personalistyczną” potencję tekstu, d) reprezentanta wspólnoty, koryfeusza, który umożliwia widowni uczestnictwo *per procura* w działaniach decydujących o kształcie otaczającego uniwersum. Funkcje te determinują z kolei typ inscenizacji (recytacja, spektakl, przedstawienie, misterium), określają status widowni (słuchacze, widzowie, ukryci świadkowie, członkowie wspólnoty), przypisują określone funkcje kulturowe rodzajom inscenizacji (ejdetyczna, gnoseotropiczna, synestetyczna, prakseotropiczna) oraz implikują różne koncepcje teatru (rapsodyczny, widowiskowy, psychologiczny, rytualny).

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Pełny tekst tego szkicu ukazał się w języku polskim pod tym samym tytułem w „Zeszytach Naukowych KUL”, Lublin 1987, nr 3–4 (119–120), s. 103–112.