

LITERATURE

SOME MODERN THEORIES OF POETIC DRAMA

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Theoreticians, who devote their attention to the problem of poetic drama are not numerous; even if they do so, their conclusions must often be read between the lines of their works which deal with the theory of drama in general. Poetic drama, verse drama, prose poetic drama, dramatic poetry — these terms recur in critical writings on drama and theatre, but there is, thus far, hardly any complete theory of poetic drama, as a genre. T. S. Eliot, for instance, (Eliot 1934 : 135) equates poetic and verse drama; for him no poetic drama can exist, if it is not written in verse. Granville-Barker, on the other hand, (Granville-Barker, 1953 : 85) states that poetic drama is not simply drama written in verse, and thus “verse drama” becomes a purely technical term, applied to any versified dramatic production. Leaving aside the rather unprofitable discussion of verse as the chief distinctive feature of poetic drama, it is possible to divide writers on the subject into two groups. Some of them, among others Denis Donoghue, Francis Fergusson or J. L. Styan, discuss poetic drama in terms of the structure of the play, of its language or the relationships between its elements and the coherence of concrete elements of composition. Others deal with the problem of tragedy or with the problem of transcending realism; for them poetic drama is a transcendence of simple reality and points to some higher order of life and universe. It is also possible to distinguish a third group of critics, who discuss poetic drama in terms both of structure and of transcending realism.

Let us begin with a brief survey of critical opinions dealing with the phenomenon of poetic drama in terms of its structure.

Denis Donoghue, the author of *The third voice — modern British and American verse drama* (Donoghue 1959 : 3 - 18), discusses poetic drama and its determinants. The poetry of drama is not merely or necessarily a verbal construct; it inheres in the structure of the play as a whole. Consequently, the

“poetry” of drama is not in any one part of the play nor in any one of its elements, but in the manner in which and the degree to which all the elements act in cooperation. A poem consists of words, so whatever is chosen to be regarded as the unit of poetic composition — the single word, the syntactical unit, the verse line — is necessarily verbal. But the unit of the play is not encompassed within the verbal realm. If one isolates a moment from the thousands of contiguous moments in a play, one should regard as the unit of theatrical composition everything that is happening in that moment, simultaneously apprehended. Words are being spoken, gestures are being made, the plot is pressing forward, a visual image is being conveyed on the stage itself. The term, which encompasses all these elements is “situation”. The play is a succession of enacted situations, so chosen and arranged as to constitute the objective equivalent of the motif which is the action of the play. Every situation in a play, just like a word or a verse — line in a poem, is to make an essential contribution to the perfection of the composition. The ideal implied in such requirements is that of an “organic unity”. The unity pleases because, while enjoining its own completeness, we also apprehend the operation of perfect relationships. According to J. L. Styan — another prominent theoretician — situation must be sufficiently defined in a play and it is to justify the whole of the play (Styan: 1960 : 227). Primary meaning arises from the tactical handling of actors in their elementary role as human counters in a strategic game, from the arrangements of “characters” in a “situation”. Situation is manipulated by the author, while the character involved in it, appears to grow. As character grows, in turn it reveals relationships. Thus the audience apprehends the creation of a character, the development of a situation, the unfolding of the play’s theme (Styan: 177).

Particular situations, unfolding the play, contribute to the perfection of the play. Donoghue (Donoghue: 18) compares them to the words in a poem. Styan states that situation manipulated by the author reveals relationships and the play’s theme.

These opinions on the role of the situation in a play may be closely associated with the views offered by Francis Fergusson in his *The idea of a theater* (Fergusson, 1949 : 159). Discussing the problem of modern realism in such dramatists as Ibsen and Chekhov, he points out that both of them were able to create in the narrowness of realistic drama a certain kind of theatrical poetry, masquerading as reporting; it is a poetry of the theatre, as defined by Jean Cocteau*

* Jean Cocteau in “Préface de 1922 to *Les Mariés de Tour Eiffel*.” L’action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l’est pas. J’essaie de substituer une poésie de théâtre à la poésie au théâtre. La poésie au théâtre serait une dentelle délicate, impossible à voir de loin. La poésie de théâtre serait une grosse dentelle: une dentelle en cordages, un navire sur la mer. Les scènes s’emboîtent comme les mot d’un poème.”

and not only a poetry of words: it is based upon histrionic sensibility and the art of acting, it can only be seen in performance or by imagining a performance. Ibsen and Chekhov are able to define the action by means of their plots and particular situations of their plays, which having a shape and rhythm of their own, dictate the dramatic form. They imitate action according to the Aristotelian prescription: not as a concatenation of events, but a movement of the psyche; not the action of an individual but a more general action, which all share by analogy, and which we see adumbrated by ways of the individual characters and their relationships. Both dramatists thus accept the literal and transcend it. The “poetry” of poetic drama is not solely a poetry of words, but a poetry of rhythmic relationships and contrasts of situations established by the performers. Chekhov’s poetry is hidden behind naturalistic surfaces, yet the form of the play as a whole is nothing but poetry in the widest sense: the coherence of concrete elements of the composition.

Thus Fergusson discusses not only the structure of poetic drama which is to be coherent as far as particular elements are concerned, but also touches the problem of transcending simple realism. The drama of Ibsen and Chekhov is poetic because of its structure, but at the same time because of its transcending the literal.

Particular dramatic situations must have a coherence of their own, not only they are to unfold, by association or contrast, the theme of the play. The audience, in the framework of one particular situation is made aware of many elements which constitute the situation.

Among these elements, Harley Granville-Barker, an actor and producer, stresses and makes more precise the contribution of the actor (Granville-Barker 65):

„Language in the theatre ... is not simply verbal language. The artist thinks in terms of his material. The dramatist, then, must think in terms both of speech and action; and in terms of his structural or pictorial background besides. The artist thinks also of the proportionate importance of each item of his material to the particular piece of work he has in hand, its use for the effect he wants to make. But there is a fourth and most important item in the dramatist’s means of expression — the personality of the actor... if his part is not sufficiently filled in for him, he has no choice in its performance, but to fill it in for himself.”

Up to now our concern has been the problem of structure and of specific language of the drama. The language of drama was viewed not only as dialogue, but it included other elements as well. But language itself is sometimes considered as the major factor in drama and since drama is an enacted conversation, it has to be distinguished from other literary genres. Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of criticism* does not discuss the problem of poetic drama, (he equates all the kinds of drama and does not distinguish poetic drama as a

separate category) nevertheless he adds much to the theory of language of drama (Frye 1957: 268 - 269).

„The suiting of style to any internal character or subject is known as decorum or appropriateness of style and content. Decorum is in general the poet's voice, the modification of his own voice demanded by subject or mood. And as style is at its purest in discursive prose, so decorum is obviously in drama, where the poet does not appear in person. Drama might be described, from our present point of view, as epos or fiction absorbed by decorum. Drama is a mimesis of dialogue or conversation, and the rhetoric of conversation obviously has to be a very fluid one. It may range from a set of speech to the kind of thrust and parry which is called stichomythia, when its basis is metrical; and it has the double difficulty of expressing the speaker's character and speech rhythm and yet modifying them to the situation and the moods of other speakers.”

Decorum is, according to Frye, the principal category of drama just as poetry, according to Eric Bentley, is the main factor stimulating the “poeticity” of drama. In his *Life of the drama* Bentley discusses four kinds of dramatic dialogue (Bentley 1964 : 82 - 89).

Naturalistic dialogue is the one which is as close to the actual talking as possible. Since drama is spoken words, it must always retain a discernible relation to the language as spoken. “In the lower-middle-class mentality of the drama which presents the lower middle class will be noted the drift of Naturalism, toward mere life toward nonart” (Bentley 84).

The second kind of dramatic dialogue is rhetorical prose,

„Prose Rhetoric could be called more naturalistic than the rhetoric of verse, not just because people speak prose, but because it relies more heavily on patterns from life, or, more exactly, on patterns from other arts, and more practical ones, than literature. The theatre, in his department of prose rhetoric, has drawn very heavily upon two „artistic” institutions: the church and the law court. Usually when people call a prose play “preachy”, they are referring to content, but there is an organic connection between preaching and the style of dialogue of a great deal of prose drama” (Bentley 86).

The third kind of dialogue is rhetorical verse. When we take another step from everyday talk, we come to drama in verse, which is not poetry in the fullest sense, but “meter aside, operates much on the lines of prose rhetoric” (Bentley 88). There is something the Germans call Pathos which is the legitimate feature of the old style in theatre and which is now counted a fault; it implies a heightened form of language and of delivery. The word “pathos” conveys not only this, but also the feeling of elation that goes with it.

The last kind of theatrical dialogue is poetry which is the most important for our remarks. The differentiation between rhetorical poetry and poetry pure and simple is as follows.

The rhetorician takes language as it is, and marshals his words with all the professional skills of pulpit and law court. But the poet does not regard

words in this way, words are tools he makes and re-makes while using them. The rhetorician is an improver of phraseology, a professional “rewrite man”. The poet, on the other hand, likes to get at a thought before it is fully a thought, before it has been pinned down with words. With him, the word-finding and the thought-thinking proceed together, and the result is a new language, new phrasing new combination of vocabulary. Bentley admits that a poetic dramatist can use all the four kinds of dramatic dialogue, and thus it is possible for him to appeal to many kinds of an audience. He asserts the superiority of poetry in drama: according to him, it has the widest range, being able to absorb all kinds of dialogue.

J. L. Styan and T. S. Eliot while discussing poetic drama (or the possibilities of using poetry in drama) are concerned with both aspects of the problem which we have singled out at the beginning of this survey — they not only treat poetry as a means of poetic drama, but simultaneously point out the problem of transcending realism.

Styan compares the role of language in drama to that of imagery in poetry (Styan 1959: 11 - 12). It must carry and particularize what passes on the stage and its validity can be properly judged only through the theatre. In this statement Styan is very close to Granville-Barker and Fergusson. Poetry can make the drama uniquely precise not only for the actors to work with, but also for the audience to react to. It can do this especially where the author's subject cannot be represented by the details of real life. Through dramatic poetry he can secure the depth and intensity, while the effect of poetry in the theatre will be of the same order as the effect of words in a poem: it will extend the meaning, range and power of the author. “The poetry is there to express and define patterns of thought and feeling, otherwise inexpressible and undefinable. This is the legitimate reason for its use” (Styan: 28). Poetry lies in the depth and strength of the whole meaning of the stage action and only indirectly in the words spoken. “If a playwright uses verse today, it is because he wishes by traditional methods to make his play a more universal statement, one of the extended range. So he rejects ‘representational’ for ‘presentational’ dramatic form” (Styan: 32). By doing this he may affect the whole treatment of his subject: the stage may become a platform for a staccato presentation of an abstract idea, and the actor may become a marionette, acting in a style suited to the degree of abstraction. The language is only one manifestation of the original image of the play conceived in the dramatist's mind.

Styan's remarks on the use of poetry in drama thus become a dissertation upon the range of poetic drama in general. Apart from the fact that a dramatist uses poetry for his utterance, he simultaneously achieves a wider and more universal meaning, than any dramatist using prose.

In search of a consistent and systematic formulation of the theory of poetic drama, we are left only with the body of views of T. S. Eliot, who discusses

the problem of language of poetic drama, its structure, its range and appeal to the audience's mind.

The problem that Eliot found particularly interesting, was why poetic drama had anything potentially to offer to the audience, that prose drama could not. It poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time when they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. "Poetry must justify itself dramatically and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it flows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate" (Eliot 1934 : 137). The audience should be too intent upon they play to be fully conscious of the medium. When discussing language in drama Bentley differentiated four kinds of dramatic dialogue; Eliot draws a triple distinction between prose, verse and ordinary speech, which is mostly below the level of either prose or verse. And so, if we take into consideration the above-mentioned distinction, it will appear that verse on the stage is as natural or as artificial as prose, or alternatively, that prose is as natural as verse. Yet — Eliot says — because of the handicap, under which verse drama suffers at the present moment, prose should be "used very sparingly indeed; dramatists should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said, and when we find some situation which is intractable in verse, it is merely because the form of verse is inelastic" (Eliot 238). The audience must get accustomed to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it. Verse will be poetry when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes a natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which emotions can be expressed at all. It is extremely important for a play to be able to say homely things without pathos, as well as to take the highest flights without sounding exaggerated, especially if it is concerned with contemporary life. If poetic drama is to recover its place it must enter into an overt competition with prose drama. People are prepared to listen to verse from the lips of persons dressed in the fashion of some distant age; they should be made to hear it from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses like ours and using cars, telephone and radiosets. What a dramatist has to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives, not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike ours, an "unreal world in which poetry is accepted" (Eliot 139). Generally speaking "whatever means of communication the dramatist is going to use, the drama, if it is to be poetic, must give some perception of order in life" (Eliot 1957 : 94 - 95). And so poetic drama is to give a picture of man's condition, of laws ruling man and history, the problem of crime and punishment. In this single paragraph Eliot allows poetic drama to be written in prose, although in all the other essays he equates poetic drama with verse drama.

"I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order. To go so far in this direction as it is possible to go, without losing that contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry. For it is ultimately the function of art in imposing a credible order upon reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation" (Eliot 1957 : 97).

Of all literary forms drama has the greatest capacity for recreating a complete and ordered world. Eliot attempted to lead the auditors to a sense of religious awareness by demonstrating the presence of the supernatural order in the natural world. And thus, through the rhythm and dramatic structure of poetic drama, the dramatist is to touch eternal man's dilemma. Beginning with the structure, Eliot comes in his theoretical writings to the problem of the universality of poetic drama, of transcending realism and giving a perception of some higher order in life and universe.

H. D. F. Kitto in *Form and meaning in drama* shares to some extent the views of T. S. Eliot. His book is not concerned with poetic drama or its theory, but with religious drama. Still, he applies the same characteristics to religious and poetic drama, often substituting the term "religious" by "poetic", so I feel excused for considering his theory of religious drama as concerning poetic drama as well.

"There has emerged the conception of the religious drama — a form of drama in which the real focus is not the Tragic Hero, but the divine background. This conception, if it is a sound one, gives rise to several considerations ... We may notice, that the distinction between secular and religious drama is not a mechanical one. There is religious drama in which gods do not appear, and secular drama in which they do. There are no gods in *Medea* or *Hecuba*, yet these plays must be regarded as religious drama: treated as tragic character studies they fail; they make good sense only when we see that the real Tragic Hero is humanity itself ... The essential question is whether the play exists on one level or on two, whether the real focus lies in one or more characters, or somewhere behind them; in fact what the field of reference is" (Kitto 1964: 231).

What religious drama gives us is Awe and Understanding. Its true katharsis arises from this, that when we have seen terrible things happening on the stage "we understand, as we cannot always do in life, why they have happened, or if not so much as that, at least we see that they have not happened by chance, without any significance" (Kitto: 232). We are given a feeling that the Universe is coherent even though we may not understand it completely.

The tragic poet constructs his play in such a way that the actions of the characters, being likely ones, combine to produce a result which is seen to be inevitable, either in prospect or in retrospect, or both. This result may be said to display the validity of divine law in human affairs. The chief character or characters may themselves commit grave mistakes which lead them to disaster,

or they may be persons who are affected by the wrongful actions of the others, in which case the play may end "happily" for them. These are all matters of indifference. One thing is constant: the assertion of a world-order symbolized by the presence of gods.

"... Religious drama is a distinct land with principles of its own, different from those of tragedy of character ... Religious drama contains gods as well as men, and where gods are present, they must take precedence. Only when human drama in the foreground is seen against the background of divine action, is the structure and significance of the play truly seen" (Kitto 1964 : 244).

Divine activity is a controlling element in the religious drama, because it represents "the framework of inexorable law" (Kitto: 245), or it may be a representative of inherent natural forces. The divine activity neither controls nor renders them merely pathetic, but is rather a generalized statement about them. The persons and their actions must be real, true to life, not generalized into flabbiness, or they will not convince the audience of anything; they will naturally be vivid and sharp because the dramatist was an artist, not a demonstrator.

We can say that the tragic poet combines two characteristics which may appear to be contraries, but in fact serve and reinforce each other: sharpness of detail and the greatest possible generality.

The notion of the two levels in drama appears also in Irena Sławińska's *Sceniczny gest poety*, a book in which the author not only summarizes the most important works on the theory of poetic drama, but also comes to very interesting conclusions as far as theory itself is concerned.

According to Irena Sławińska, poetic drama was constantly fighting against simple realism in order to achieve a level on which the universal human problems could be presented. The main concern of poetic drama is the fact that it is a protest against the poetics of realism. A poetic drama is not to be read, but it is to be interpreted, and the interpretation should be done not only in terms of *hic et nunc*, but also in terms of *semper et ubique* (Sławińska 1960 : 232). It is to touch the universal problems of mankind — those which are the most difficult to solve; it is to discover the truth which is independent of time and space. The truth is to lead us to the essence of the universe and to discover those laws of our world which are not immediately seen in our everyday life. And so poetic drama is to touch the problems which are universal for any human being — the problems of existence and of eternal laws governing world and history. In this kind of drama the field of reference is indefinite — poetic drama is to be synthetic; it is to be two-levelled. All the events in a poetic drama become generalized: they happen on the life-level, but simultaneously they point to the inner strata of man's existence. The order of events is to illustrate some order of life and of the universe. The determinant here is "the metaphorical character of the action" (Sławińska: 236) — the most important feature of

poetic drama. The fact that poetic drama is two-levelled means simply the existence of two possible fields of reference: apart from the fact that the drama presents a "piece of life" there is a constant perspective for humanity.

The problem of the metaphorical character of the action is common both to Kitto and Sławińska. These are according to both critics the determinants of poetic drama.

In this connection it may be worth while to turn back to Allardyce Nicoll's views on poetic drama, which he expressed in *An introduction to dramatic theory* — a book published in 1923, dealing with the universality of poetic drama and poetical effects which can be used in it. Nicoll considers rhythm to be one of the most important features of poetic drama, and it is just rhythm that allows poetic drama to become universal. In any great tragedy we face infinity. If we are religious, we shall say that the contact with infinity is a contact with divine forces; if we are atheists, we shall say it is a contact with the vast, illimitable forces of the universe. The origin of tragedy was song; its development has been along lyrical lines, as a means of raising the events above the levels of real life. Consequently, verse claims a close attention of every tragic dramatist. Before he casts off verse, he must consider whether verse be not one of the necessary and integral parts of true drama, or at least whether in abandoning verse he will not have to give to his drama other serious qualities as a recompensation for its loss.

Twenty years later Una Ellis-Fermor shares the views of Nicoll on the universality of tragedy as the best example of poetic drama. She starts with the notion of a constant conflict between content and form, technique and medium. But of no less significance is the conflict arising from the limitation of mood. And the equilibrium which here results is essential to the highest reach of dramatic art. Indeed, in considering it, we may perceive certain of the basic relations between the limitation and achievement. Tragedy depends most intimately upon the preservation of strict and limiting balance between two contrary readings of life and their accompanying emotions at work within the poet's mind. Such equilibrium is thus a distinguished mark of the highest achievement in this kind, individual works tending to approach supremacy in so far as they derive from this conflict and reveal this resultant balance.

"Again, as in all great drama directness, rapidity and shapeliness of presentation must serve the ends simultaneously of concentration and probability, and the resulting beauty of passion, form and thought will constitute dramatic poetry, whether the vehicle be prose or verse. Finally, this image of tragic circumstance which we call a tragedy must involve catastrophe, either material or spiritual, arising naturally from the action and forming an integral part of it" (Ellis-Fermor 1945 : 128)

In any great tragedy there is an element common to the individual plays, though differing in form and theme, an element which marks both the treatment of the material and the nature of the resulting interpretation: it is the

presence of the conflict between two impressions made by poet's experience upon his mind. The part of experience which is most clearly revealed is the intense awareness of evil and pain. But in conflict with this specific response is another of a wholly different kind: the intuitive and often undefined apprehension of another universe implying other values.

"In the finest tragic writing there is equilibrium. The reality of evil and pain is not denied; if it were, tragedy would not speak to man's condition as it has done from the time of Aeschylus to the present day. Nevertheless, something is revealed which makes possible the transvaluation of the values upon which it rests: the works of art which we call tragedies are distinguished from others not only by technical characteristics of subject matter or form, but also by the balance maintained between the conflicting readings of the universe and of man's condition and destiny" (Ellis-Fermor 1945 : 130).

The impressions in conflict may be of various kinds; of a malevolent or a beneficent world-order; of apparent lawlessness or underlying law, of casual and a causal, a chaotic against a patterned universe. This kind of conflict gives tragedy a universal meaning and the factor of universality makes it poetic irrespectively of the use of verse or prose.

The subject of poetic drama became (among many others) a subject of the day in Poland in the mid-fifties. The discussion did not bring any strikingly new views on the problem, but its brief survey may once again bring out sharply what has been said thus far. Polish critics re-discovered poetic drama as a means of giving up veristic realism, and thus the discussion was concentrated upon the problem of the opposition of poetic drama to realism. "Teatr" — the weekly devoted to the problems of drama and theatre ("Teatr" 1956) in one of its leading articles defined poetic drama as one which revolted against realism in art: according to the editors in realistic drama the artist does not find any impulses to present the essential truths of man's existence, and thus one must transcend realism in order to present the essential truths of man's existence. The radicalism of this extremist formulation is one of the repercussions of the struggles of those days against the imposed formula of rigid realism.

Roman Brandstaetter in "Szpada i kij" — an article published in *Teatr* (Brandstaetter 1956: nr 7) discusses poetic drama in terms of its means. He considers poetic drama to be a symphony, as far as its structure is concerned, rather than literature. Poetic drama is to give a poetic condensation of reality, rather than its copy. Brandstaetter's views on poetic drama were shared by Wojciech Natanson, who in his article "Warto przypomnieć fakty" discusses the fundamental features of poetic drama in similar terms (Natanson 1956) Poetic drama is to answer questions concerning man's existence and those which are essential to our world.

Apart from the fact that the formulations used by the Polish critics were very radical, the views expressed by them were, generally speaking, identical

with those expressed by others; they became generally accepted views, and the proof for this acceptance is that Marjorie Boulton in her school manual discusses poetic drama in terms of its transcending realism. Poetic drama is the one which brings the audience one step further from the literal realism. In poetic drama "souls are conversing" (Boulton 1960 : 115) and look for the inner truths of the universe. It is the inadequacy of language which causes the use of poetry in drama, but in the hands of a genius, prose can also become the vehicle for transcending realism and presenting, what is not easy to be communicated.

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