

Kačer, Tomáš

## The poetic tradition

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## 4 ► The Poetic Tradition

In the field of study of drama and theatre, there is a virtually unlimited number of possible approaches and theoretical positions and their varieties one may choose from when setting out to closely examine a particular play or the dramatic mode in general. This book accords with the theoretical and analytical approach to drama and theatre, whose beginnings may be traced back to Antiquity. Aristotle's analysis of tragedy has been influential since his "course on poetics, as part of the program of instruction at his Academy" (Gerould 43) in the fourth century BC. Understandably, this tradition has not been universally constant, but several crucial developments took place in the field of theory towards the end of the nineteenth and during the whole course of the twentieth centuries. Out of these endeavours, it is mainly Russian formalism, structuralism and, later, semiotics, where the attempt on a "scientific" approach to the dramatic art in line with Aristotle's view of poetics can be traced.

It was Aristotle who suggested that the study of the components and their relationships within a work of drama, i.e. the poetics of a dramatic work which was the classical tragedy in his understanding, leads to a proper understanding of the mechanisms at work in the given work of art. Similarly, Formalist and Structuralist approaches come to their observations about a work of drama or its inner mechanism when they begin their enquiry from a basically identical starting point. To know the elements is to know the whole.

Although formalism was developed in Russia, with Structuralism being considered as a mainly French invention (with a Prague connection, which is of interest here) and semiotics taking its roots in Switzerland and the United States, these theoretical advancements can be considered a comeback to the poetic tradition after a few centuries of other approaches to drama and art in general – or, perhaps, a completely new set-up of a general theory and philosophical approach to phenomena in the United States' case. Although the development of structuralist and semiotic enquiries may be observed in English speaking countries after the arrival of Russian and European scholars, the poetic approach was not a new or foreign element in the English scholarly tradition at that time or in the turbulent development in the second half of the twentieth century in English

speaking countries. Given the Aristotelian influence on the English school of thought through the Middle Ages<sup>10</sup> and Modernity, one can agree with Umberto Eco's statement that unlike continental thought, "the Anglo-Saxon tradition had continued to take Aristotle's poetics seriously and without interruption" (Eco 237).

Generally, the theoretical background of this study is based on synthetic versions of semiotics of drama and theatre within the Anglo-American tradition. The two seminal books on the theory are *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* by Keir Elam (1980) and *Theatre as Sign System* by Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991). Both books aimed at a concise overview of semiotics for the English language public at the times of publication. As such, they incorporate some aspects of Russian formalism, Prague School structuralism as well as the whole course of development of semiotics, where there are two main currents which meet at various points regarding the drama and the theatre:

- 1) "semiology" of Ferdinand de Saussure proposed in his *Course in General Linguistics* as a science which "would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them" (de Saussure 15), leading to a semiotic conception of language as a system of signs (i.e. his theory does not primarily include phenomena present in the artistic forms of drama and theatre), and
- 2) semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, who introduced the helpful division of signs into three types: "There are three kinds of representations. 1st [...] may be termed *Likenesses*. 2nd [...] may be termed *Indices* or *Signs*. 3rd [...] which are the same as *general signs*, and these may be termed *Symbols*" (Peirce §14).

Both books on semiotics by Elam and Aston and Savona offer a potent tool to approach both dramatic text and performance or, if you wish, drama and theatre.

There are also other sources for the theoretical background. One of them is Otakar Zich's *The Aesthetics of Drama*<sup>11</sup> from 1931, which is an important study of drama from an aesthetician's point of view that follows principles of Husserlian phenomenology and which, in its approach to components of drama, fits within the theoretical framework of contemporaneous structuralism. Due to the long-term unavailability of this work to readers in world languages, some of Zich's observations were not accessible to semioticians who do not read Czech. Zich's distinction between the actor, stage figure and character is one of his crucial contributions to the general theory of drama. It was only after the WWII that this distinction was recognized. Still, it is this particular area which still remains rather fuzzy in both Elam, and Aston and Savona, where the category of a "character" often becomes a general term for at least two of these distinctions, thus merging a character (a spectator's mental image) with the stage figure (an actor's-on-

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10) Knowledge of Aristotle's own writing is disputable at this time, as it took centuries to rediscover his works via Arabic scholars and other channels. However, his analytical approach survived in the English nominalist and empirical traditions.

11) An English translation of his seminal work of the original Czech title *Estetika dramatického umění* has not been published yet. The title currently under consideration is *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art*.

stage physical creation). This distinction helps a more precise analysis of the category of “character” when studying a dramatic text and/or a performance.

There is also another source that supplements the two main books on semiotics. It is the now classic work on the analysis of a dramatic text by the German theorist Manfred Pfister: *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (1983). This work also belongs to the line of a structurally inclined enquiry of drama. It provides a complex overview of analytical approaches to a whole range of components constituting a dramatic text. It provides numerous examples of analyses of texts while acknowledging the fact that dramatic texts primarily serve as a basis for a performance. It is not a complete theory of drama in its whole, but it gives powerful tools for its study: “[Pfister’s] interest has not been in drawing up a comprehensive definition of drama as a whole but in putting together a detailed and sophisticated description of its structures and textualisation processes” (Pfister xv). Although Pfister remains firmly based in the dramatic text, his method of analysis shows the effects of a textual passage on a performance. The assumption that there is a definable and traceable connection between the dramatic text and its representation on the stage is one of the crucial points that helps the analyses in this book, which capitalize on semiotics of drama and theatre.

## 4.1 ► Historical Development

As it has been suggested above, there is a theoretical undercurrent that has been accompanying the analytical approach to works of literary art in the Western tradition, of which the semiotic approach is one of the most promising representatives. As this undercurrent is much connected with Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its influence, reaching back more than two millennia, it would be overambitious and, indeed, futile, to attempt to grasp the development of this line of the Western thought in its whole here. Yet it remains an undeniable fact that the history of a systematic study of works of dramatic art has been accompanying Western thought since its beginnings. To return to the sources of the study of literature which aim at a systematic understanding of dramatic texts in particular, is to inevitably return to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This classic work is “the foundation stone of the study of literature in the Occidental cultural realm” (Doležel 11) and as such it still offers great inspiration for contemporary discussions about drama. It is the core text that asks how a dramatic text is made, what its constituents are, and what relationships there are among them.

Lubomír Doležel’s *Occidental Poetics* (1990) is a discussion of precisely this undercurrent. Doležel studies the history and development of a structuralist approach to literature and finds connections that lead from Aristotle to contemporary structural poetics, which he defines as a “cognitive activity grounded by the general requirements of scientific inquiry” (4). An emphasis on the science of poetics is one of the crucial elements that distinguishes it from other approaches.

Doležel continues in his general definition of the scientific nature of structural poetics suggesting that it is “scientific poetics that rejects deterministic and reductionist approaches to literature” (4). This statement hints upon Doležel’s understanding of the

position of poetics vis à vis other approaches, such as those that follow the tradition of the Romantic view of a work of art as a manifestation of an author's creative genius or others that tend to be seen as "speculative" in comparison to "scientific" poetics, such as psychologizing attitudes or a hermeneutic branch of literary analysis. Patrice Pavis similarly considers differences between a precise, scientifically based semiotic approach to theatre, with other traditional types of theatre studies. In the article "The Semiotics of Theatre" he places theatre semiotics in opposition with the following approaches to drama and theatre, which he places under the category of "theatre studies" (or, *sciences du spectacle* and *Theaterwissenschaft*): (1) Interpretative criticism and performance reviewing; (2) Theatre history, (3) Dramaturgy, (4) The aesthetics or poetics of theatre, and (5) Theory of theatre which "can only with difficulty be distinguished from aesthetics" (3-4). While Pavis acknowledges the scientific nature of poetics when he asserts that it aims at "formulating the laws determining composition and functioning of text and stage" (3), he overestimates the normative outcome of a poetic approach. He considers such normativity inseparable from poetics, which on the level of the (scientific nature of) the approach, does not hold. This criticism by Pavis, relevant mostly to the fourth category of theatre studies, deserves further explanation.

Pavis sets the qualitative difference between semiotics and an aesthetic/poetic approach to drama and theatre on a different level. While Doležel focuses on the method of approaching literary texts, Pavis's point of view is that of branches of "theatre studies", i.e. specific mode of application. He also generalizes when he claims that aesthetics/poetics "always aims at integrating the theatrical system into a larger whole – genre, arts system, aesthetical category" (3). It is true that *Poetics* of Aristotle suffers from this flaw, as it includes analytical, evaluative, as well as normative parts. "[...] Aesthetic theories of the theatre are most frequently normative, proceeding from an a priori definition of the 'essence' of theatre" (3), continues Pavis. However, the development of semiotics after Pavis' article (1978) in the English speaking context proved that a semiotic analysis can adopt a lot from the aesthetic/poetic approach thanks to the contributions of the Prague School and later developments to the semiotic method of analysis of both text and performance. While Pavis claims that a normative aesthetic/poetic approach cannot deal with Brechtian theatre, because it does not fit the understanding of drama as a genre based on conflict, there are a number of 1980s semiotic analyses which subscribe to the aesthetic/poetic tradition, which study Brechtian theatre (for example, Aston and Savona call this mode of drama and theatre "radical", and place it side by side with the "classical" and the "bourgeois"), and which do not place a normative claim. In other words, on the level of method and approach to drama and theatre in general, semiotics has proven to be a logical follower in the scientific ("structurally poetic" (Doležel)) approach. As Pavis himself admits, "[...] semiology, far from conflicting with other 'theatre studies', integrates them and ingrates with them; this methodological reciprocity should allow us to make better use of the results of older disciplines, while confirming at the same time their scientific status" (4). Although Doležel is aware of such a normative trap of poetics, as he acknowledges in *Occidental Poetics*, he yields to the potential of poetics for studying literature in a "scientific" way.

What follows from Doležel's scientific definition of poetics is, among other things, the focus on structures which can be defined and subsequently closely studied and analysed in a work of literary art. This is why Doležel comes up with a specification of "structural poetics", accentuating the area within the general field which follows the structuralist trend. As a result there are definable relations between individual elements, which represent one of the cases where the structuralist method and the interest of structural poetics meet. As any branch of science or the humanities, poetics too has numerous modifications; if poetics is a way of studying works of literary art in general, then the line of development which follows Aristotle and stretches to structuralism and to structurally inclined semiotics is a viable and productive method to actually *do* poetics of dramatic works.

## 4.2 ► Aristotelian Poetics

What remains inspirational for the later developments in the field of structural poetics, as Doležel calls it, and in the twentieth century inquiries within the fields of structuralism and semiotics, is mainly that part of *Poetics* that deals with the action of a tragedy. Along with the action, i.e. what happens in a tragedy and of which "plot is the imitation" and "the arrangement of the incidents" (Aristotle 1.VI), there are in total "six parts, which parts determine [the tragedy's] quality – namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song" (1.VI). Aristotle further explains that "most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality" (1.VI). As far as action is concerned, Aristotle is interested in how it is organized. Aristotle opts for studying tragic authors who are about a century older than himself. It is in the works of these authors where he finds the ideal representatives of his view of what it is that constitutes a true tragedy. He notes that each tragedy which succeeds in causing the tragic effect, which is in his view the ultimate goal of a tragedy, "has a plot and artistically constructed incidents" (1.VI). The sequence of episodes is crucial to how a tragedy's plot is constructed. Aristotle identifies relationships between the individual parts of the plot's development (or "action") and defines their progression in order to achieve the tragic effect and thus a tragic play. He observes that any action, being it *recognition* [*discovery*] or *reversal of the situation* [*peripety*]<sup>12</sup> (which are both parts of the Complex action, that is to say, elements of the development in the story of the play) "should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*" (1.X). In this fashion, Aristotle comes up with a complex theoretical definition of what a tragedy is. In Doležel's terms: "The representation of tragedy becomes a *structural* model. The genre is represented as a composite whole constituted by a set of parts" (Doležel 22-3). These observations refer to plot and

12) In square brackets, there are equivalent terms in English for *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, respectively.

its construction, and it is this legacy of *Poetics* that accords with Doležel's understanding of Aristotle's founding role in the Western poetic tradition.

Eco, too, finds the most important element of *Poetics* in the approach to action which, in his view, is this part of Aristotle's conception that has remained influential. Eco posits that Aristotle's observations regarding the construction of the plot are of a more general nature. From Eco's point of view, Aristotle in his *Poetics* performs a *semiotic* analysis of the progression of the plot. When Aristotle talks about various structural elements of action (such as *reversal of the situation* [*peripety*] and *recognition* [*discovery*]), he writes about the production of meaning that the use of these structural elements leads to. In the example of *Oedipus the King*, Aristotle explains the meaning-productive effects of *reversal* [*peripety*] (which is, along with *recognition* [*discovery*] and *suffering*, a part of the tragic plot): "Thus in the *Oedipus* [*the King*], the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect" (Aristotle 1.XI). Similarly, he shows the meaning-production which is at work in the case of *recognition* [*discovery*] in an even more explicit manner which, in principle, is rather close to a semiotic analysis: "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune" (1.XI). This is, naturally, a present-day reader's perspective of *Poetics*: "...another, very modern reading of Aristotle, one that Aristotle himself encourages, pretending to talk about tragedy whereas in reality he is providing us with a semiotics of narrativity" (Eco 244). This is a modern interpretation, because Aristotle's understanding of substances supporting his theory of *poiesis* differs from the present one and "[we] had to wait for the crisis of the concept of substance to rediscover a semantics implicit not in his [Aristotle's] works on logic but in those on ethics, poetics, and rhetoric, and to think that even the definition of essences could be articulated in terms of underlying actions" (252). It was in the twentieth century that the inspiration spreading from *Poetics* could be reconsidered, reapplied and further developed, be it on the level of a general structurally inclined understanding of a literary text or on the level of a semiotic approach to the analysis of meaning-productive procedures derivable from a literary text.

The quotes from *Poetics* and from Eco show where Eco sees the connecting point between *Poetics* and the whole tradition of Western structural poetics as Doležel regards it. Doležel's approach reveals that *Poetics* is the founding text of the whole tradition of the Western approach to literature, where structural analysis is present and that one of the possible ways to *do* poetics in the sense of studying works of literary art is based on a structurally inclined understanding of literary texts; furthermore, Eco points out that *Poetics* includes a tendency towards a general semiotic theory of the narrative. Based on these two points, it is now possible to proceed further in time and in the line of explication of the theoretical background of this book.

Eco summarizes the overlap between various stages of development of structural poetics that links Aristotle with the development of poetics practised in the English language and the Prague structuralists' findings: "if Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1942) managed to blend the principles of Anglo-Saxon criticism with the work of the Russian

formalists and of the structuralists in Prague, it was because they referred to Aristotle in almost every chapter” (Eco 237). There are several findings of Czech structuralists of the first half of the twentieth century that represent plausible interpretative and analytical tools for studying dramatic texts and theatrical performances. Among these findings are their views of linguistic functions, mainly the aesthetic (poetic), communicative, and referential functions, as well as their views of a dramatic text.



