Theses for the analysis of dramatic text

Before setting about analysing single works, it is wise to seek out the necessary tools, and to be aware of what questions we wish to ask. But to organise this questioning, we need a general diagram, or at least an open list of questions to settle, an organization chart of the principal tasks to be accomplished in the framework of a general theory of the dramatic text.

But is it legitimate to talk about the dramatic text in general? Would it not be more appropriate to talk about dramaturgy, which is the art of the composition of plays that also takes into account theatrical practice? We would then have to locate this dramaturgy in history, check whether it is classical, romantic, realist, absurd, etc. Just as it is quite problematic to speak of the theatre in general, we cannot make a theory of the dramatic text in itself, we must envisage it in its specific historical framework: the theory of the dramatic text should therefore always be checked against historical considerations about the work being analysed.

If the study of dramatic texts has been so neglected over the last thirty or forty years, it is probably because, in reaction to literary studies, we have wanted to recognise the specificity of dramatic writing by highlighting its transitory state, as it waits to be performed, and, since the end of the 19th Century, to be directed. In refusing, rightly enough, to make the theatre a literary genre, we have contributed to the loss of interest in the dramatic text and its analysis (Pavis, 2000). When stage practice, in the 60s and 70s, virtually eliminated text, or reduced it to the status of aural scenery, dramatic writing was completely eclipsed. When, in the 1980s, the text came back in force, owing to the exhaustion (and the high cost) of visual theatre, we had somewhat forgotten how to read a play: reading it on the page had become a rare luxury. The theory of the dramatic text did not follow the recovery of the text. We haven’t yet tackled ‘new writing’, post- Beckett and Genet. This very innovative new writing demands completely new instruments of analysis. Will we soon have them to hand?
The model of textual analysis that comes from our ‘intuitive’ – spontaneous and naïve – readings of texts is strongly influenced by the rules of classical French dramaturgy (tragedy and comedy of the 17th Century): this dramaturgy actually often serves as a reference point for the new experiences that bring it into crisis or into question. The analytical model that we propose must then both offer a certain transhistorical universality and also adapt itself to the different historical contexts, notably to those of contemporary works. It is firmly placed on the side of reception, where the reader ‘activates’ the text, ‘collaborates’ with it, uses different reading mechanisms. It is thus based on the reception of the reader when faced with the text. This reception formalises all the different cognitive operations that take place, it is the polar opposite of a genetic method that dedicates itself to the genesis of the work, to its source, to the author’s working method.

Our analytical model is inspired by Eco’s, which is dedicated to narrative text, and is described and tested in *Lector in fabula*. Following on from the work of Petőfi (1976), Eco distinguishes several structural levels in the fictional text that are “specifically conceived as the ideal stages of a process of generation and/or interpretation” (1985:85). Our own diagram retains the infrastructure of the five levels and the opposition between fiction and the world of reference, but is entirely adapted for the theatre, in order to take into account this “word in action” that constitutes the theatre, to bring the fictional model and the world of reference (putting into play) of the reader into confrontation: two worlds that, for Petőfi and Eco, correspond to the intensional and extensional dimensions (1985:89). The column and the four boxes on the left relate to the fictional world and its logical properties, independently of their existence in our world of reference. This world of reference, in the right-hand column, is the concrete place from where the reader, or the spectator even, interprets and questions fiction through the dramatic text that she thus puts into play, be it in a concrete way, in a production, or in an imaginary way, in the act of reading. The mise en scène, then, is as much in the individual’s imaginary world in reading the text as in the concrete practice of staging. This is moreover the reason why the study of texts is only possible if we account for the theatrical practice in which these texts can be made to signify, can be made live, and are
put into circulation. This is why we conceive of this analysis of texts as the continuation of performance analysis. To put it another way: dramatic texts are nothing but the trace of a performance practice. The difficulty is to read them imagining how they have been shaped in the writing process by the different constraints of acting and performing.
A) TEXTUALITY: STYLISTICS
How does it speak?
(1) Music and matter of the words
(2) Types of word
(3) Lexicon
(4) Isotopy and coherence
(5) Stage directions
(6) Marks of stylisation and literariness

RHETORIC OF THE DISCOURSE

B) SITUATION OF ENUNCIATION
How is it made to speak?
(1) Conditions of communication
(2) Conversational maxims
(3) Metatextual conscience
(4) Rhythmization, punctuation, score
(5) Intertext
(6) Marks of theatricality

DRAMATIC TEXT

FICTIONAL WORLD

I DISCURSIVE STRUCTURES: THE PLOT
(1) THEMATICS AND SUBJECT: what is it about? (themes, leitmotiv, topoi, mythos, characteristics)
(2) PLOT: how is it told?

RHETORIC OF THE THEMES

II NARRATIVE STRUCTURES: DRAMATURGY
(1) CONVENTIONS: how are things represented?
(2) STORY: what is it about?
(3) CHRONOTOPES (SPACE/TIME)
(4) DRAMATURGY: what is the conflict? How does it work? What does it represent?
(5) TEXTUAL FIGURES
(6) GENRES AND DISCOURSES: tones, registers, rules

RHETORIC OF THE NARRATIVE

III ACTANTIAL STRUCTURES: ACTION
(1) ACTION: What is done? What events? What situations?
(2) ACTANTS: Who acts? What type of character? What gestus?

RHETORIC OF ACTANTS

IV IDEOLOGICAL AND UNCONSCIOUS STRUCTURES: MEANING
(1) THESIS: What is it saying?
(2) IDEOLOGY: What is inferred?
(3) UNCONSCIOUS OF THE TEXT: What is it hiding?
(4) SPOTS OF INDETERMINANCY
(5) ATMOSPHERE: What do we feel?

RHETORIC OF THE SOCIAL DISCOURSE AND OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

WORLD OF REFERENCE AND PUTTING INTO PLAY

HYPOTHESES ON THE PUTTING INTO PLAY OF THE MEANING
(1) What might it mean?
(2) What might it be telling us? What does the reading (or the acting) bring out?

CHECKING THE HYPOTHESES
(1) What codes do we have at our disposal?
(2) What does that confirm? Reading hypotheses
(3) Where and when?
(4) What happens?
(5) What interaction?
(6) Through which genre frame are we reading? How is the story told?

STRUCTURES OF THE WORLD
(1) What action?
(2) What forces are present? How can we figure them out? How does the action unfold?

HISTORICITY OF THE TEXT, OF THE REALITY AND OF THE PUTTING INTO PLAY
(1) What access is there to the fictional world from the reader’s world of reference
(2) Social, historical, cultural code of the work and of the reader
(3) Inferred, implicit, presupposed, maxim, ideologeme
(4) Latent content, text and subtext
(5) Effect produced, legitimisation, interpellation
(6) What is known and what is believed?
The diagram distinguishes in the left-hand column, in A, the text in its internal constitution and in the right-hand column, in B, the same text, but as we might bring it into play, how we are capable of receiving it in order to construct it and bring its meaning into play.

Each reception of a dramatic text is obviously relative: it depends on from where we ask the questions. What theory of reception are we proposing? We are proposing that of a reader, anchored in and conscious of her situation of enunciation, her search for meaning (I,A), her hypotheses as a reader (II,B), the structures of the world in which she lives, her own historicity (IV,B).

The questions in the right-hand column (excluding those in B) thus correspond, number by number, to those in column A, and they even extend them, centre them on a more personal perspective for the reader. They extend them so well that it becomes difficult to differentiate between those on the left and those on the right, since it is not possible to radically separate the fictional discourse from the world of reality (Schaeffer, 1995:376).

In reading the fictional world, the reader updates the contents of the text. She sounds out its depths, establishes its different levels: discursive (I) for the thematics and the plot; narrative (II) for the dramaturgy and the story; actantial for the events, the actions and the actants (III); ideological and unconscious (IV) for the theses and the latent contents. In immersing herself beneath the surface of the text, the reader accesses, progressively passing through four levels each more abstract and secret than the last, the successive layers of the text; at each step she endeavours to ask the relevant questions using the necessary tools.

Before proceeding to these ‘depths’ or at least to these more abstract and less accessible layers, the reader observes the linear and visible manifestation of the text, its surface, which results from its textuality, its stylistic properties, its literary devices (in A) and from its theatricality, its situation of enunciation (in B). Textuality and theatrical
enunciation thus make up the first visible and superficial layer of the text, this surface layer obviously being of major and central importance.

This model of textual cooperation thus organises itself according to the opposition of surface and depth, visible and invisible. The most visible, and readable, is made up of the textual (A) and theatrical (B) surface; everything here is given to be seen, like a textual matter offered up to sight. The invisible is the domain of ideology and the unconscious, everything here is latent, implicit, destined to be deciphered. Between these two extremes, between (A) and (IV) we find the trinomial of dramaturgy in the wider sense, and thus of dramaturgical analysis:
- in I, the plot and the thematics,
- in II, the story
- in III, the action and the actants.

The story, i.e. the dramaturgy in a restrictive sense, is the intermediate stage, the hub between the detail of the episodes and the generality of an action. At each of the three levels of the trinomial, one same element takes on a specific dimension. For example, the way of telling: on the surface (I) one describes the story by enumerating a series of facts and episodes; one will address the depths (II) of the story by sticking to generalities (“it’s the story of a man who…”); one will clarify next the deep motivations behind the actions (III), before coming to conclusions about the the hidden, parabolic or unconscious meaning of such and such a conduct, thereby revealing explanatory messages (IV). In the practice of analysis, it is not always easy to distinguish between the plot, the story, and the action, notions often used interchangeably, but it is recommended to maintain the distinction in order to clarify the level of abstraction where the observation is made, and to fine tune the questions we ask of the play.

Beyond the differences of level between surface and depth one should be able to navigate from one box to another and to connect the apparently separate instances, which are in fact linked by an internal logic. The bridges between the boxes (that the theory endeavours to establish and to justify) allow access at all moments and in all directions,
they enable a reading map and thus an order of questioning that is neither fixed nor imposed, particularly in the case of contemporary plays.

The universality of this model in terms of telling stories exempts us from defining a priori a specificity of dramatic writing that authors in fact scarcely manage to establish; it leaves open the question of dramatic writing’s relationship with writing in general, and that opening is indispensable for the study of contemporary dramatic writing.

We will systematically comment on this diagram of textual cooperation in order to spot the explanatory theories as well as the disciplines from which they originate. This might provide the necessary tools to analyse the plays, be they classical, contemporary or even ‘still to come’. The diagram should thus be seen more as a set of tools the reader is invited to use according to her own needs than as an imposed route where all the tools necessarily have to be used.

A) Textuality

1. Music and the matter of the words. Analysing a dramatic text is not just establishing what the story is, reconstituting the actions, following the verbal exchanges; it is firstly about immersing oneself in the textuality, in the matter and music of the text; it is also living the concrete, sensory and sensual experience of materiality, learning to hear the sounds, the rhythms, the games of the signifier.

In keeping with its etymology, the dramatic text is a fabric of words, a weave of sentences, lines, sounds. But this fabric is not always made of the same stuff: it carries the trace of a voice, of a language, of a given situation, of a mental representation where language merges with non-verbal elements. This trace of practice, this trademark of the text, thus varies from one period to another.

The text carries a material trace of a particular stage practice. There is a real difference between a text transcribed from an existing performance, that the author puts on paper after the show, and a published text, waiting to be read or staged. The status of the text confronted with a performance will not be the same. In analysing written texts,
we must remember that they carry the mark of a particular stage practice, be it anterior or posterior, in that they anticipate the performing conditions at the time when the text was written. The stage directions which are more or less present is often the trace of these playing conditions.

The textual analysis, which works only on the trace of the text (a trace which, moreover, is unstable and which is only a momentary reflection of its history), rediscovers stylistics, a discipline that has long been neglected and discredited by structuralism, hardly developed for and inappropriate to the study of theatre. It asks the text ‘how it speaks’. The immense field of stylistics offers its services to the reader to recognise the devices used, notably the lexical, grammatical and rhetorical ones. Applied to the theatre and to stage enunciation, stylistics does not necessarily have to analyse the text in a specific mise en scène; it is content to observe the volume, the visibility, the relay of a voice and a body in order to feel the value of the textual material awaiting performance. It notably takes on the task of studying:

- the stylisation of the language, its way of mounting diverse fragments by simplifying, unifying, homogenising, aestheticising heterogeneous materials. Dramatic language is not an imitation of normal language, it is always its stylisation;
- the oralisation of language, its way of adapting to the phonetic laws of diction, to the text being placed in the mouth of the actors;
- the plasticity of the text, its ability to mould itself to the actors’ voices and bodies.

2. Types of words. These concern the form used to generate this word matter. It is not a question, or not at this stage, of ‘textual figures’ (Vinaver, 1993: 901), of the strategy of the use of words in the universe of fiction, but of the verbal forms used, of the dividing up of words between the speakers, of their blocks of text.

We establish whether the text is in prose or in verse, in a ‘natural’ language or a ‘formalised’ one. The alexandrine, for example, obeys very particular laws and has very particular constraints, which are not simply stylistic or decorative, but have repercussions on the dramaturgy and the global meaning of the play.
The types of speech boil down to a few simple forms: monologue, soliloquy, lines, dialogue, polylogue. Each of these has a particular function: dialogue is for example by turns dramatic, philosophical, lyrical, etc. The form varies considerably: large chunks of text, asides, lively exchanges, or direct address to the audience.

We will examine the specific properties of each type of word. Thus for dialogue:
- the order in which lines are spoken;
- the number and the nature of the speakers;
- the visible segmentation of the text (sequences, scenes, acts, tableaux);
- the source, the direction and the goal of speech: its vectorisation (Pavis 1996);
- silence and speech;
- the character’s word or the author’s word;
- the marks of orality (examined later as an aspect of theatricality).

3. Lexicon. The study of the lexicon informs us about the vocabulary used. The lexical field is made up of verbal occurrences expressing the same idea, which allows one to grasp a theme (in I). Thus the lexical field of the deal in the Koltès play In the solitude of cotton fields, covers terms around the notion of exchange: blows, weapons, caresses, drugs or words. The semantic field of a single term, that of desire, for example, in the same play, opens up the panoply of interpretation, without ever giving a definitive answer.

4. Isotopy and coherence. Isotopy is the guideline for the reader crossing these semantic and lexical fields, organising them into more or less coherent networks. The reader feels the need to know by what guideline she will be able to organise the information and indices that her reading reveals. One can read, for example, In the solitude of cotton fields as recounting a commercial transaction, a drug deal, but also as a verbal duel where one tries to have the last word and to delight in the pleasures of the word.

The coherence of the text depends on the way in which we find and bring together terms or compatible themes. It manifests itself through characterisation in the words of
the lexicon (‘rhetoric of the sentence’ in A), through the emergence and the rhetoric of the themes (in I), the logic of the arguments and the narrative (rhetoric of the narrative in II), the logic of the actions (in III), and finally in the free associations of the unconscious and of ideology that analysis endeavours to assemble as a narrative (in IV).

5. **Intertext.** The intertext is made up of the sum of allusions or sources of other texts that the reader is in a position to discern. It is not only linguistic or literary, it is also visual, gestural, mediatic or cultural. The dramatic text is located at a crossroads of several networks of texts that have laminated it as much as enriched it; it is thus never isolated, but interwoven into different intertexts. In crossing the different (cultural, mediatic or artistic) intertexts, the text keeps transforming itself. It concentrates, accumulates, amalgamates a series of specific properties that the analysis must, almost hopelessly, try to reconstitute and redeploy.

The intertextual competence of the reader lies in their capacity to associate the text with numerous other texts, be it thematically, generically, mediatically or stylistically thanks to a trace deposited in them by other works, including visual traces.

6. **Marks of literarity.** When one remains at the surface of the text, one can observe, as if through a window or with a magnifying glass, the linguistic characteristics, the stylistic devices, the rhetorical figures, in short all that comes from the literarity of the text, what distinguishes the literary text from an ‘ordinary’ text, what constitutes its ‘poetic function’ (Jakobson). The first commandment of analysis is to stay at the surface of the text in order to appreciate its texture and materiality. Next, one endeavours to link this surface to ‘deeper’ questions (less ‘visible’ ones) that are posed by its dramaturgical analysis (in I, II, III, IV).

The literary character of a text does not depend on its literary quality or its stylistic refinement, but on its insistence on its own stylistic devices. Thus the slang spoken by the youths in *Une envie de tuer sur le bout de la langue* originates from a sophisticated montage of expressions borrowed from several different eras and milieux that Xavier Durringer has carefully brought together to give the impression of an authentic milieu.
The literarity expresses itself in the skill of the composition and montage of the discourses and not in the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the slang.

The literary analysis of the dramatic text certainly uses numerous devices of literary texts in general, but adapts them to the possibility of a theatrical performance of this text. Practically, this means that we can analyse the plays as literary works, with all the sophistication of literary analysis and theory, but that we must also adapt them to theatrical enunciation (dramaticity and theatricality, which is not, let us remember, the same thing as mise en scène).

The marks of literarity correspond, in B, to the marks of theatricality, which anchor the text in a stage situation.

**B) Situation of enunciation**

The situation of enunciation (or situation of discourse: Schaeffer, 764-775) gives the text ‘on paper’ an imaginary life onstage, it gives the reader a mental representation of the stage and of the acting, it represents the circulation of the word. In studying the influence of the situation on the words (the discourses, in A), we call on pragmatics.

1. **The conditions of communication** need to be reconstructed from the situation of the speakers and the ‘given circumstances’ (Stanislavski) of their words, their actions and their gestures. It is a question of determining who is speaking, to whom and to what end, to identify the verbal and non-verbal enunciators, to specify at what moment of the play we situate ourselves in which dramatic situation. To understand the scene is to grasp what is at stake in the game, one’s ‘superobjective’ (Stanislavski). The characters produce language acts that are subject to a constant exchange. Theatrical enunciation is a “dynamic progression of speech acts interaction” (Schaeffer, 1995: 746).

2. **Conversational maxims** are indispensable in order that communication be established. Grice (1979) thus names the principles of cooperation (to accept and facilitate dialogue), pertinence (to stick to the subject), truth (to affirm established things), quantity (to mention only what is strictly necessary), manner (to avoid
ambiguities). In the theatre, these maxims of good communication are regularly broken: a constant source of comic or dramatic tension.

3. **The metatextual consciousness** of the play is used whenever the play refers to its own enunciation, speaks of the act of speaking instead of representing the world, thus breaking the convention of an intangible fiction. With Genet, Pinget or Beckett, the text seems more concerned with reflecting on itself and on theatricality than with a description or a representation of the world. Sometimes this awareness of a very narcissistic theatricality allies itself with the mechanism of guiding reception: the text thus lets us understand how it should be understood; it can also do everything in order to destabilize the reader by refusing her any overall explanation, any cooperation. This mechanism of guiding goes hand in hand with the search for spots of indeterminacy (in IV, A); it also concerns the effect produced on the reader and her interpellation (in IV, B).

When the characters’ text refers to language in order to check its devices, its way of communicating, its lexicon and its syntax, one refers more precisely to the metalinguistic function (Jakobson).

4. **Rhythmatization** is the art of giving the text a particular rhythm; it is the result of the concrete act of reading, a voluntary act that immediately engages a particular understanding of the text, of a possible syntax, of its priorities, of its speaking strategy, of its intonation and thus of the identity of the speakers. To give rhythm to a text is to follow or to establish particular punctuation, spot the repetitions, the constants, the isocolies of the sentence (i.e. the equal lengths of its elements), determining the score of the silences, decelerations and accelerations, watching out for the emergence of the meaning, trying several possible rhythms and meanings. One has to segment the text continuum according to several longitudinal systems that analysis undertakes at each level, from I to IV:

- narratology: according to the temporal or causal logic of the narrative, the division into acts, sequences, scenes, movements, tableaux, etc.;
- rhetoric: in the progression of the arguments and the supporting points of the discourse;
- dramaturgical: in the concatenation of events, situations, actions;
- respiratory: according to a real breathing plan for its “units of breath” (Claudel).

It is the ‘out of sync’ moments and the interferences between these networks with different rhythms that give the impression of varied and open punctuation.

In its respiration and its enunciation, the text is punctuated by different moments that organise the development of the action (cf. later in III, A). The rhythmatisation ends up creating an almost musical score for the actor, with its supporting points, its turning points, its intonation, its tempo, its moments where it stops or accelerates, where the spectator becomes conscious of the passage of time or where, in the spirit of Brecht, she can even “intervene with the judgement” (Pavis, 2000: 67-93).

5. The stage directions can be spotted thanks to the typographic convention that distinguishes them from the text spoken by the actors. They contain useful information for the reader to imagine the scene and the stage as it was envisaged by the author. As a text that overhangs, controls and comments on the dialogue that is explicitly spoken, they are sometime the key to the textual dialogue and to the play as a whole. Any in-depth analysis must imagine their dramaturgical function, their relationship with the spoken text, their way of welding literarity and theatricality. This analysis proposes a typology to evaluate which elements of the acting and of the performance the stage directions express.

The title of the play or of the tableaux, the list of characters, the foreword or the prefatory note, the notes or advice for directing are also part of the author’s indications, they are the paratext (Thomasseau, 1985). We should not consider the spatio-temporal indications of the text as internal stage directions: they are part of the dialogue and not of the text written by the author for the practitioners’ use. The true stage directions, those written in italics and not spoken by the actors, do not make up the mise en scène of the text, but a series of directives to make the characters’ words signify.
6. **The marks of theatricality** in the text (thus distinct from the stage theatricality inferred by the acting) are recognised by the tools of communication and the theatrical situation: an exchange between an *I* and a *you*; a reference to time, to space, to stage action; the self-referentiality of theatre, of artificiality and of conventions; the signs of orality.

Orality is an important domain of theatricality: like theatricality it is more or less implicitly inscribed into the text. One should particularly seek its trace in the following indices:

- hesitations, silences, pauses, the insistent presence of the un-said.
- The syntactic or rhythmic breaks, the defective or hesitant construction indicating reticence or a difficulty in speaking for the speaker (figures of anacoluthon) “rupture in the concatenation of the syntactic dependences “(Molinié, 1992: 47) or of the aposiopesis (interruption in the expected sequence of syntactic dependences) (Molinié, 1992: 61);
- the phatic marks of the discourse
- the slang, the familiar style, with all the avatars of everyday communication.

The marks of literarity and the marks of theatricality are not identical, but they do tend to merge. In the theatre, literarity – the beauty of a verse or of an image, for example – does not have any importance in itself. It must be taken up by the dramatic situation. There is an implicit theorem that consists of saying that the poetic effect of the text is multiplied by the dramatic efficiency of the scene, thus by the capacity to theatrically translate certain stylistic properties of language. However, to assert itself and unfurl, the literary (poetic, according to Jakobson) function and the theatrical (dramatic) function need to be confronted with the fictional world and its construction, from I to IV. We could therefore define dramatic writing as the relationship between textuality-theatricality and the fictional world.

But what is the relationship between the textual surface (in A and B) and the dramaturgical mechanisms in I-II-III-IV? According to Vinaver, author and theorist of *Ecritures Dramatiques* (1993), the method of ‘analysis of theatre texts’ is based on the
following postulate: “a) to understand a theatre text means primarily to see how it functions dramaturgically; b) the mode of dramaturgical functioning can be understood by the exploration of the surface of speech” (1993: 895). The first of Vinaver’s propositions seems irrefutable: certainly dramaturgy gives the key to the functioning of the play, particularly as regards the action and the characters. The second hypothesis is more open to debate. It surely applies in most cases, but it happens that a textuality, an avant-garde stylistics might hide a classical dramaturgy (or vice versa). This is the case in neo-classical plays that, under the guise of newness, draw on very well established recipes (Le Visiteur, by E.E. Schmitt). Sometimes the ‘innovative’ or ‘daring’ textuality is merely masking dc of a very dated dramaturgy and ideology. It is thus appropriate to carefully check Vinaver’s postulate and to observe the possible gaps between the form of the text and the contents of the dramaturgy. We recall that Szondi (1987) made of this criterion of gaps the foundation of his theory of the evolution of drama from 1880 to 1950.

Once the surface and the materiality of the text have been experienced by the reader, the thematic, narrative and actantial contents become accessible to her and one can thus sound out the themes, the story, the action of the play.

I. Discursive structures: the plot

The structures form the framework that both underpins the organisation of the different textual levels and allows us to observe the four levels or layers from the visible surface of the text. At the first level, that of the structures of discourse, i.e. of the fairly immediate perception of the plot and of the themes, the reader perceives two axes simultaneously: the horizontal axis, the sytagm (the events told) and the vertical axis, the paradigm (the themes tackled). It is located at the intersection of these axes, of these sets and of these two types of gaze.

The question that the reader spontaneously asks herself is hermeneutical: what does this play mean for me, what is it talking about and who am I to understand it in this way? We must immediately be more specific: am I a naive reader having found the play by
chance, reading it for pleasure? Or am I professional reader-director, bent on putting on the play at hand? The actor’s perspective (how would I play that?) and that of the director (how will I interpret the whole text?) appear the most complete, demanding and adequate and it will be the one we propose for these reflections. This perspective, however, is not the only one: the perspective of the historian, the philologist, the aesthetician, the cultural or intercultural expert is just as valid and possible. We would hope nevertheless to put these specialists at the service of an actor- (or director-) reader, who is supposed to be reading in order to then realise the act of reading in a (real or virtual) staging.

1. **The thematics is the totality of themes, motifs, leitmotiv and topoï** that one notices in a first reading, without yet knowing how to organise this material. It is not yet observed in a precise form or structure (a dramaturgy); it is not formulated in the light of explicit or implicit theses either, even if every theme aspires to assert itself in the form of a thesis.

   *The theme* is present throughout the text; the reader endeavours to identify it and to integrate it according to the semantic oppositions or a constellation of nuances and variations. The theme is punctual, locatable, it dynamically makes its way towards a thesis that ends up structuring all the thematic occurrences.

   *The motif* is more like the background, the fundamental situation, the general frame within a larger narrative unit.

   Themes and motifs do not exist in a ‘pure state’, they become horizontally integrated into a plot, a way of telling, to link up events. The plot only becomes clear in relation to a story which constitutes itself in a global narrative content, which only truly finds its meaning according to the causal and temporal logic of a thesis.

   The question of the thematic (‘what is it about?’) is asked by the reader from her world of reference: the reader asks herself what the text can tell (her), what hypotheses of reading and narrative would be able to organise and to functionalise the themes, since the themes remain, as long as they have not been connected to other boxes, ‘free electrons’, fleeting and subjective impressions, hypotheses to be tested, implicit theses that must be translated into words by the reader in order to exist as language.
The rhetoric of the themes sometimes translates as a *leitmotiv* (a recurrent theme) or a *topos* (“a stable configuration of recurrent motives in literary texts”, according to Curtius, 1948). It then reveals an already codified, or even stereotyped, thematics, awaiting a dramaturgical structuring (a testing of the story and of the action) and an ideological confirmation (a testing of the meaning as well as of the social and unconscious discourse).

2. **The thematics organises itself** all along the plot, in its very movement, since theatre does not put up with, though there are exceptions: long thematic stoppages where the motives would be made explicit; it is caught up in an unstopping dynamic where dramatic action inscribes itself.

To describe and resume the plot invites one to notice the moments of the play, its *dispositio*: in classical dramaturgy, one can clearly distinguish the exposition, the *nodus*, the *peripeteia*, the *dénoüement*. Epic theatre proceeds differently, but it too can be broken down into distinct episodes. The plot is the linking up of the events of the play, the narrative and figurative part of the discursive structure, and notably the segmentation of the text.

The exterior, visible, division into acts, scenes, tableaux, sequences, fragments never entirely coincides with the interior division, which is the result of different narrative, rhetorical, dramaturgical and respiratory rhythms that the reader endeavours to piece together.

**II. Narrative structures: dramaturgy**

Narrativity, the way of telling a story with theatre, is the object of dramaturgy. The narrative structures are located between the themes and the theses, between the study of explicit forms, at the surface of the discourse (in A and I), and the study of implicit contents (in III and IV). It is a question, in the end, in the spirit of Szondi (1987), of bringing together form and content inside the dramaturgy, this hub of analysis that asks two distinct, but complementary, questions: How is it effective? What does it represent?
1. One must first consider the acting conventions used by the text, observe the manner in which they participate in the representation of the dramatic universe, the type of codification that they imply. Every piece of dramatic writing presupposes a knowledge of stage conventions, it is inspired, if only *a contrario* by the stage practice of its time or of a previous era. Every reading needs this same knowledge of the practice and of its conventions.

   Conventions operate at all levels of the text, and not only at the level of dramaturgy. There are stylistic conventions (A), narrative conventions (I), conventions of human actions (III), ideological conventions (IV) charged with clarifying how the text refers to ideas and theses. It is thanks to these conventions, on every level, that the text represents the world, situates itself in a relationship of mimesis with the exterior world.

2. The story is composed of all the events that make up the history, the contents of the narrative (‘what is being told?’), and is not interested in the details nor the twists and turns of the story. The story, then, is the narrative contents, the signified of the narrative, the action expressed at its most simple which can be summarised in a single sentence. At this level of abstraction, the reader or the dramaturg (who undertakes the dramaturgical analysis on behalf of the director) tries to understand the principal hypotheses to check whether the plot matches, at a deeper and more general level, what the story says in detail. The reader pieces together and constructs the story by representing a space and a time where the actions can take place. One cannot however mechanistically apply narratology to the study of the story, since the dramatic text (usually) takes the form of a dialogue, that is, as a dynamic series of speech acts.

3. This alliance of space and time, that Bakhtin calls a chronotope (the “fusion of spatial and temporal indications in an intelligible and concrete whole”, 1978 b: 137), constitutes an indissociable unit of fiction whose intimate signature it becomes. It is sometimes possible to extract the chronotopes of a text, by noting the places and the events, seeking the theme and the term designating this strange union. One could thus speak, for example, of the chronotope of the margin in *Une envie de tuer sur le bout de la langue*, of the *deal* “in neutral, unspecified territory, not set aside for the purpose” (p. 15) in *In the
solitude of cotton fields, of the childhood home in *J'étais dans ma maison et j'attendais que la pluie vienne* by Lagarce thanks to these chronotopes, the meaning is deployed and the action finds its representation and figuration.

4. The nature of *conflict* gives an indication of the dramaturgy used: *nodus/dénouement; enigma/revelation; imbroglio/recognition, plot/clarification* for a ‘closed’ classical dramaturgy. Dramaturgy studies the stakes of the action, its conditions, its ends; it establishes (with Stanislavski) the main task or the superobjective of the play and the through line of action by which one gets there.

5. Dramaturgy is the science of conflicts which it tackles according to a typology of “textual figures” (Vinaver, 1993: 901). Vinaver makes an inventory of twenty or so such figures that he establishes from the type of conflict between the characters in Western theatre, from the Greeks to our time. Every typology, even Vinaver’s, is nonetheless little more than an attempt at classifying forms of exchange between the characters. Vinaver’s “textual figures” recall the category of ‘figures of thought’ in classical rhetoric: the orator connecting with her discourse. Fundamentally, these textual figures go from the violent, rapid (stichomythia) open conflict to the absence of conflict (series of remarks, lyrical notes, absurd constellations). The classical conflict sometimes crosses the individual conscience of the hero: matters of conscience, of dilemma, and of tragic choice.

One should carefully distinguish between these ‘textual figures’ which describe the conflictive relations of the protagonists and the types of speech (A 2) which can be defined by the mode of writing, the textual surface or the verbal forms used.

6. If we consider that theatre is a *genre*, in the same way as poetry and the novel are, we will speak of *sub-genres*, not only in the tragedy/comedy dichotomy, but for all the existing historical forms. We will distinguish these forms according to themes, styles and dramatic structures.

A knowledge of genres and discourses of the text provides information on the rules, registers and tones of the work being analysed. Knowledge of the genre and the
hypothesis emitted regarding the genre of the work studied determines its interpretation
to a great extent.

The rules of a sub-genre are more or less codified by the literary canon; the invention
of new forms creates the obligation to state the rules, renewing or transforming a sub-
genre.

The register or the tone of a speech concern the way of speaking, the level of style
and the implications of this type of speech for the action and the fictional universe.

Determining all of these factors of dramaturgy helps the reader to understand little by
little what history is being recounted, and how. The rhetoric of the resulting narrative is
the key to the story and to the conflictive exchanges; it arises from and across the ‘textual
figures’ carried out by the characters in their transactions.

Dramaturgy is as much about the production of texts (and of stagings) from the point
of view of the author and of the dramaturg (in the German sense), as the reception of the
texts (and the stagings) by the reader-director who must piece together from the theatrical
object the hermeneutic options that have been the author’s. It is always only a hypothesis
that must ceaselessly be clarified and checked as regards the meaning of the action and
the frame in which it takes its meaning.

III. Actantial structures: the action

Having tackled the play from its textual surface, the rhetoric of words, of themes
and of textual figures, having compared what the story is and how the plot tells it, the
reading continues its progression from the specific to the general, from the concrete to the
abstract and finally reaches the more remote levels of action (III) and ideas (IV).

The reader identifies bit by bit the forces that govern the actions and the motivations
of the characters and, more generally, the actants, forces which are not necessarily
anthropomorphic that feed the conflicts. If theatre is about, as Brecht asserts, “making
live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings” (1964:
180), the reader reconstitutes these events, she attributes to the characters social
motivations which vary with each period”. These actions, these situations, these
motivations illuminate the events, sometimes from the dramatic text, the stage directions or the behaviour of the characters embodied by the actors.

1. The action is what is given to be seen, the continuous series of events. It is organised according to a ‘through line’ (Stanislavski) or, by contrasts, in a fragmented way. It is central or reduced into parallel partial actions. Its progression can be continuous and regular or halting and random.

   The through line of action forms the spine of the drama; in particular, we note:
   - the turning points in the action: where it suddenly takes a new course, or the narrative goes into a different phase;
   - the supporting points, be they dramaturgical or gestural or vocal, that become foundations for the reader, then the actor;
   - the points the action goes through: obstacles, conflicts, climaxes, stops.

2. The actant, a notion inherited from Greimas’ semiotics (1966), is more or less abstract and anthropomorphic. It is handy to distinguish all the nuances and gradations of the character from the abstract actant to the concrete individual, and to arrange a continuous and regular passage between the abstraction of doing and the concreteness of being. In their human form, the actants as characters will have psychological, behavioural, moral, cultural personalities. In the abstract form, they will be lines of force, contradictions, ‘intercharacters’. Thus the approach of the characters takes place through textual, discursive, actantial mechanisms and not at all through a psychological identification with the character, and psychological identification uses poorly defined categories.

3. The actantial model is useful in making an image of the configuration of forces, to test the various characters one by one from the side of the actant and in their confrontation with the others. It is important to not reduce the actants to the existing characters in the play, but to mobilise all the live forces of the drama. We will be careful not to be mistaken in the subject/object arrow (see diagram) and to attach the sender/receiver to the
object and not the subject, to locate the helper/opponent in relation to the subject of the action.

We will benefit from merging the too abstract and general semiotic model from Greimas, with the often psychologising and anecdotal Stanislavski:

Contemporary texts, at least those that still use acting characters can be analysed thanks to the actantial model, but the importance that one accords in the texts to other levels, notably stylistic ones, challenges the use of categories of action or story, for the benefit of a word-action where the character is no longer the central active force. That is the reason why the category of the individual character is not central in the diagram of textual cooperation, any individualised mimetic trace being referred to the very general actants or to the discursive and stylistic properties of the text.

To describe the larger categories of action, it is wise to go from Vinaver’s distinction between the “word-action” and the “word-instrument of the action”. The word-action “changes the situation, in other words […] it produces a move from one position to another, from one state to another”. The word-instrument of the action “helps transmit the necessary information for the development of the overall action or of detail” (1993: 900).
To describe the actants should not be reduced to a psychological analysis of the characters, but should illuminate the lines of force of the contradictions. Sometimes these oppositions can be seen in the gestus of the characters, in “the realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another” (Brecht, 1964: 198). The imaginative reader will be able to recognise these gestus that the author suggests, and by the evocation of power relations and by the gestural language that marks the hierarchies, she can figure them out. Hence the rhetoric of actants, that is all the figures that contribute to the dynamics of the drama, what Stanislavski called the through line of action with the superobjective of the play and the principal task of each character.

IV. Ideological and unconscious structures: meaning

1. Having spotted the themes, their dramatic shaping (and deformation), their deployment in the action of a space-time, we come to the ideological question of the political and unconscious thesis: what does it say to those who try to access the world of fiction? How does the reader project herself and identify herself from her world of reference? This box is the black box of the unsaid. Ideology and the unconscious, as Althusser (1965) demonstrated, operate side by side, since the stakes of the drama as well as the spots of indeterminacy are the terrain on which they meet and the site of their manipulations: these spots are as mobile as the effects produced on the reader are unpredictable. The history of mental attitude, sociology and psychocriticism (preoccupied with the unconscious of the author and of the textual figures), will be the key disciplines in this approach. “Because theatre always asks for ‘live’ emotions, it always has an ideological dimension”, notes Alain Viala (1997: 17) very pertinently.

2. The reader, like the spectator, will be aware of the historicity of the text, she will read it in its political, cultural, social context. She will be attentive to the historicity of the represented reality, that of fiction as envisaged in the past as much as that from our current point of view; she will be aware of the historicity of the putting into play, that of our point of view on the work which is not fixed for eternity. The ideological reading is collective, it is that of the group, it is more interested in the audience than in the individual reader. It brings together the collective conventions of this audience in a given
historical moment, that Jauss (1978) calls the “horizon of expectation”, Iser (1985) calls the “repertoire”, Fish (1980) the “interpretative community” and Bourdieu (1992) the “cultural field”. This collective dimension of reception, which in the theatre is fulfilled directly through the presence of the audience, can be felt in all levels of column B (where the text is put into play).

3. The unconscious of the text – a slightly superficial and enigmatic formula to describe what the text hides – is as much about the ideological contents as about the unconscious thoughts of the author and the reader who, each in their own way, try to access the different possible meanings. In the theatre, this implicit, latent, content is often taken for the subtext where the essential core of the message takes refuge, while one only perceives the surface of the text. To grasp the subtext – what the text implies or underpins, what it carries or bears – we turn to several notions:

• (A) The implied is suggested by the text as a consequence of its enunciation, as something that goes without saying. It is “a reasoning that the receiver does and that the speaker anticipates, from the particular event which constitutes the enunciation” (Ducrot in Schaeffer (1995: 570).

• (B) The presupposed: is brought by the knowledge on which the text is based when asserting a new proposition. A presupposed indication “is introduced as a given from which one speaks, but which is not directly at stake in the speech […]”: Thanks to the phenomenon of presupposition, it is thus possible to say something while doing as if it had not been said, a possibility which leads to see presupposition amongst the forms of the implicit” (Ducrot, 1972: 23). Thus the beginning of In the solitude of cotton fields: “If you are out walking, at this hour and in this place, you must want something” (p. 17). The dealer presupposes as true the idea that the client is walking, and draws the irrefutable conclusion that it is desire that moves him.

• (C) The implicit is opposed to what the text explicitly says. There is an implicit meaning beyond the lexical, syntactical, semantic meaning of the words. The character dialogue not only making explicit utterances, but posing as given or as a fait accompli that which is expressed implicitly, ‘saying without saying’.
• (D) **The ideologeme:** constitutes a unit that is both textual and ideological within a social, ideological and discursive formation. For example, the term *deal* in the Koltès play, which is defined outside of the play’s dialogues and is not taken up in the dialogue, belongs to a certain social milieu; it can be perceived as a very particular type of discourse and plays the role of an empty enigmatic element, that the reader keeps being invited to define. This ideologeme corresponds perfectly to the strategy of the play and to the dynamics of an unending search for otherness.

4. **The spots of indeterminacy,** be they hermeneutic, ideological or unconscious do not necessarily refer to the theory of the concretisation of the schematic view of the text (Ingarden, Jauss, Iser). They oblige the reader to figure out actants and events, to re-establish a coherence and an isotopy from isolated and silent elements, to fill in the oversights and the silences of the plot and the fictional world evoked by the text. They constitute the enigma of the text that the reader makes an effort, in vain, to resolve. This reader’s route or walk through a textual labyrinth is the place where the text and its reader are able to meet. The text proposes, but the reader disposes (and the director makes off with the takings).

Finally, the reader is invited to legitimise, i.e. to understand and admit, a certain world view. She does not always have the freedom to question or to refuse this vision, as would be possible in Brechtian alienation, but she is often constrained by the text to accept the social and unconscious rhetoric – even if she then refuses it wholesale.

5. **The atmosphere of the play,** this somewhat outdated notion used by Stanislavski, describes in an intuitive manner the general impression produced in the story, in the action of the effect produced on the reader. What does one globally and intuitively feel, at the end of the reading process? To be precise, the final result of all the indications, of the way of presenting the actions via the actor, emotions in the reader and the spectator. Reader-spectator (we should say *readator* or rather *readactor,* since the reader of theatre is always *already* or *still* a bit of a spectator and actor, the moment she imagines a scene,
a piece of stage business, a system of gestures, something theatrical that goes beyond the
text).

The effect produced oscillates between identification and distance. In identification,
the readactor throws herself body and soul into the situation, she is taken by the dramatic
illusion; with distance, she stands removed from the event, she takes her distance from it
in a political (Brecht) or aesthetic way.

It is more generally a question of putting your finger on what, in the theatrical work,
touches the readactor: “To every fictional text we can and we must ask, beyond the
already formulated questions, an additional one: what does it desire? (What does it
fear?)” (Monod, 1977: 106).

This diagram of the textual cooperation of the reader of the dramatic text is only of
interest and only functions if one conceives of its many levels as stages in an open
journey rather than as a fixed hierarchy or an imposed and unchanging path. It has the
advantage of situating the levels and the greater categories of analysis:

(A) Stylistics
I – Plot
II – Dramaturgy
III – Action
IV – Meaning

One must however beware of separating the levels in an authoritarian way and of
hermetically sealing the boxes: it would be better to fit bridges between them. Thus, for
example, the themes (in I) are still dependent on textuality (A), on the music and the
matter of the words, and only take their meaning if they are anchored in the dramaturgical
form (in II and III) and if they are problematised through a thesis (in IV). As for the
actants (in III), they are torn between the effects of character, sensitive to the
dramaturgical analysis (in II) and the hidden forces of the drama, outlined in the
ideological configuration.

To use this diagram in a living and productive manner, one must therefore establish
transversal relationships between the levels and find the tools and the notions that lend
themselves to this function. The notion of rhetoric and of figure can, for example, guide
us from one level to another:
Stylistic figures organise the text according to its tropes, its images; they are applied to the score and to the theatricality of the situation of enunciation (B).

I. The choreographic figures, the “dance with words”, the discursus, “originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, ‘plots and plans’” (Barthes, 1990: 4), organised in networks, in leitmotivs, in ways of telling.

II. The “textual figures” (Vinaver) are those of characters in conflicts, verbal and dramaturgical fencing. Even space and time, when they manifest themselves in the form of chronotoposes, are figures that are both abstract and concrete.

III. The figure, in the German sense of die Figur, which designates the character and the silhouette, is the point of intersection of the action and the actant, i.e. of the actions and the characters in an Aristotelian sense: an empty centre, but a nerve centre where the story and the characters meet.

IV. The figure as dream work or ideology work, meaning as much figurability (Darstellbakeit) as defiguration (Entstellung), the figural in the Lyotardian sense (1971), and the Deleuzian figure (2003).

The relationships of transition are also those that are forged between the fictional world (left-hand column) and the world of reference (right-hand column). The rhetoric of the social and unconscious discourse is moored in our own world, notably through belief, evidence, identification, produced effect and cathartic effect on the reader or the readator. For the dramatic text, the world of reference of the reader is constituted by the putting into play of the speakers, of their psychic and social forces via the act of reading. To appropriate the fiction by the interpellation and legitimatization of the reader, is to bring it toward us, it is to pragmatically replace it in the concrete context of a situation of enunciation.

Textual cooperation obliges the reader to choose her path of meaning, deciding at which box, and consequently with what degree of abstraction, the journey should begin and what route it should continue to take.

The classical route, that of the dramaturgy of the same name, will consist of going down, one level at a time from textuality to ideology, then gradually climbing back up...
while checking the abstract results obtained with the discourse at the surface of the
textuality.

The contemporary route, on the other hand, is very subjective and random. Instead
of systematically and classically starting with thematics (I) and dramaturgical forms (II),
too linked to figuration and to the notion of a psychological character, the contemporary
path will often begin with the description of the situation of enunciation (notably from an
attempt at rhythmatization), then will go to the ideological box, leaving the search for the
plot and the character, the story and the action to one side. One can note this in analyses
of contemporary plays: the contemporary dramatic text often takes a route of random
choices, relativizing any pretense of a global interpretation, infinitely relaunching the
reading and interpretation by a new enunciation of the text. It remains to be seen whether
contemporary dramatic writing tends to use a certain number of typical circuits between
the instances of cooperation and whether we are in a position to attempt a typology of
these writings based on these circuits.

To return to Vinaver’s hypothesis of a homology between surface and dramaturgy,
we will examine whether the current writing is born of a new, and often conflictual,
relationship between surface textuality and deep dramaturgy. For the contemporary
plays, textuality is the ‘solvent’ of dramaturgy: it scrambles and even dismisses the
classical categories of character, action and meaning.

But what actually distinguishes the classical work and the contemporary text, from
the 1980s and 1990s, and how can we adapt our diagram of cooperation to the analysis of
plays? Let us make one simple observation: owing to the temporal distance, the historical
and ideological distance in time, classical work imposes its dramaturgical choices and its
systematic circuit on us from one instance to the next; on the other hand, the temporal
proximity of the contemporary text, the immediacy of the ideologies that inform it, incite
the reader to risk everything and try anything, since any route is permissible, as long as it
helps unfold the text and surprise the reader. The contemporary route will thus be
voluntarily summary, incomplete, gratuitous, since its mission is no longer to explain or
convince. The reading of the contemporary text has in short changed meaning, since it no
longer has to find a perfect route, one marked out in advance. It must, more or less
arbitrarily, decide on a device destined to make different, almost independent (discursive,
narrative, actantial, ideological) series meet, instead of stringing them together and going over them methodically.

What is more, this incites us to change the presentation of the diagram, to avoid the impression of a hierarchy and a dualism between surface and depth. A layout with the levels as concentric circles would be closer to the embedding of the instances and of the reality of the exchanges. Each level is contained and encompassed by the next one, the passage from one to another takes place like a series of shockwaves distancing us ever more from the textual identity and materiality.

At the centre, textuality (A) is surrounded by its situation of enunciation (B). The discourses and the themes (I) are included in the story told, the story, in II, the story reads itself in a series of physical actions and events (III), which are themselves encompassed in the shoreless sea of the unconscious and ideology (IV).

We define writing as the sum of textuality/theatricality (A and B) and of dramaturgy (I, II, III, IV).

From (A)-(B) to IV, we go from the visible to the invisible, from the trace to the untraceable.

The story (II) is at the heart of the dramaturgy, caught between the plot and the action.
I and II, the alliance of plot and story, form a conglomerate constantly repeating a general and parabolic story.

II and III, the alliance of the story and the action, are located where the narrative transforms itself into a series of actions.

In IV all the theses and hypotheses on the unconscious and the sociality of the text drift without mooring. These floating thoughts sometimes inscribe themselves into events, actions (III), acting forces, concatenated into a story (II), readily spotted in the text in the form of a linear plot, with its own themes, parts of the discourse (I) and textual materiality (A).

In analyses of plays, we will take care to distinguish, in each box, the tools used, according to the historicity of the work or the reading.

The analysis of works, and particularly of more recent plays, should show whether the categories of analysis are all necessary and sufficient or if it is appropriate to eliminate some or, on the contrary, invent some new tools. The programme outlined claims to be maximalist, planning for all possible questioning, but contemporary writing might sometimes renounce certain aspects, propose others and establish an original circuit between these instances. It is just as likely that contemporary texts will be particularly unreadable if we do not know how to imagine a situation of enunciation and a stage practice inside of which they are inserted and put into play, that is to say handled, unfolded, vectorised, carried by the readactor. This means that the general model offered here, necessarily ahistorical, must be adapted, updated according to historical circumstances of the moment, notably for the performing conditions and the ideological and legitimating expectations of the spectator (their reading practice).

It remains to be determined whether each type of contemporary play corresponds to a specific circuit, with its priorities and oversights; in short we check whether a theory that is as ‘broadminded’ as possible is still in a position to account for the lush and anarchic wealth of today’s dramatic texts.

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