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978-0-521-28845-3 - Dramatic Dialogue: The Duologue of Personal Encounter

Andrew K. Kennedy

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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### 1. Concepts of dialogue

On the face of it, 'dialogue' is a transparent term, without marked ambiguity or haziness, and, what is more, without marked contradiction between the popular and the critical denotations of the word. Ordinary usage overlaps at several points with the (all too few) useful definitions offered by theorists of drama. I myself have been able to assess everyday usage by noting the response of all kinds of people to the word 'dialogue' over a certain period of time: always, some idea of conversation is at once understood or implied; it tends to have, further, a connotation of 'serious talking' rather than of 'chat', of something relatively sustained, with attempts at bridging gaps in understanding between opposed or contending parties. The growing currency of the word 'dialogue' with some such connotation – as testing and clarifying the conflict of values, standpoints, 'worlds', among opponents – underlines the general sense of dialogue as a *significant* human activity. It also seems to be understood that 'dialogue' is primarily a *verbal* activity. Paying attention to the choice of words, by speaker and listener as partners, is a prime rule of this particular 'language game' – whatever the degree of attention paid to posture, gesture, facial expression, movement, pauses and silences, or other para-linguistic clues to meaning. But those who reflect on 'dialogue' are generally aware that an exchange between speakers is more than an exchange of speeches; *what* is being said must be heard with or against *how* it is being said, what style of speech, what tone, tempo and so on. It would seem that – in a persona-ridden and word-devaluing culture – people retain a good deal of trust in signals exchanged in dialogue: perceiving and assessing character, motivation, attitude, degree of conviction and feeling; in short, all that makes for total communication. General ideas concerning the 'rules' or the 'art' of

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conversation tend to persist – ideas that significantly overlap with a philosophical/linguistic definition of conversation as essentially co-operative and logic-guided.

Despite the spread of the word ‘dialogue’ into areas of everyday communication, the unique distinctness of *dramatic* dialogue is immediately understood: written for the stage, overheard by a member of the audience who does not participate through replying, interrupting, counteracting, as he might participate in a conversation. It is probable that children acquire an early aptitude for miming or at least responding to the ‘doubleness’ of stage dialogue – from Punch and Judy on, it is like talk/it is not ‘real’ talk – as part of the general aptitude for grasping fictional–theatrical experience. If that is so, we have here another ‘competence’ (language learning being the primary one) which has a direct, intuitive ground. Though simple in origin, the experience of mimed dialogue has a complexity that may seem to require several disciplines to account for; dramatic criticism proper needs to be informed by linguistics, the psychology of playing, and the semiotics of the theatre in the first place. But in all our theorising we need to keep in mind that universal-seeming faculty for direct, intuitive response to dramatic dialogue.

Let us take Francis Bacon’s counsel and ‘cut off infinity of inquiry’ by concentrating on a limited number of concepts of dialogue – those most directly bearing on the intimate duologue, the main focus of this study. The governing concept for all dramatic dialogue is *verbal interaction*. That may sound like a tautology, yet among the very few studies of dramatic dialogue (and most general studies of drama neglect dialogue in any case),<sup>1</sup> little is said concerning the interpersonal exchange of speech – as distinct from the study of individual character, dramatic form and genre, or the features of a particular verbal style, imagery, word-play. The word ‘dialogue’ itself carries with it a fuller etymological connotation than is generally recognised; even those who have a sound enough grasp of the concept ‘dialogue’ seem to think that the word must mean two (*di*) people talking. However felicitous such a restricted meaning would, in one respect, be for a study concentrating on the duologue, we need to recall the very much richer network of ideas behind *dialogos* (from *dialegomai* = to converse, a compound of *dia* = . . . through, and *logos*). Any concept of dialogue needs to recapture at least an echo of the Greek

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significance of *logos* – one of the keywords of Western culture, connecting word and meaning, language and reality (later enriched by Christian and neo-Platonic mysticism, the opposition of words/Word, the incarnation declared in ‘In the beginning was the Word’). Not everyone can, or wants to, reach the mystical dimension of language or go all the way with Martin Buber’s concept of dialogue as deep communion, springing from a meeting of persons, in an I–Thou relationship directly experienced.<sup>2</sup> We need only retain our awareness of dialogue as a search for significance and as a flexible state of being-with-others through speech.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, hardly a mystic, first stressed the significance of dialogue as an element of drama; though the ‘plot is the first principle’, the dialogue has a unique function which cannot be replaced by other dramatic elements: ‘For what were the business of a speaker, if the thought were revealed quite apart from what he says?’ However, the *Poetics* has been rather over-exposed in criticism since the Renaissance (from Castelvetro and Hédélin to our own primers), so much so that Aristotle is now often held responsible for any verbal (or over-verbal) concept of drama – the polar opposite of Artaud.<sup>4</sup> It may be more challenging to take a leap in time and examine the central concept of dialogue offered by Peter Szondi in his *Theorie des modernen dramas*.<sup>5</sup> The context of this study (not well enough known in England though a classic of criticism on the Continent) is post-Renaissance drama seen as a *pure* form of drama. In that drama interpersonal relations have a unique role in defining and reflecting the condition of man – man in the sphere of ‘between’: between other people, between conflicting states of being (two compound words in the German text underline the relatedness of persons in drama, of man as ‘fellow human being’ – *Mitmensch* – and the relatedness of persons, through acts of decision, to the surrounding world – *Mitwelt*). Such a person-centred concept of drama excludes everything else: ‘the unspeakable . . . and the closed soul, as well as ideas that had become alienated from the personal; above all, the world of objects, beyond expression, except in so far as they enter interpersonal relations’ (p. 14). Dramatic dialogue then becomes the most significant vehicle of the interpersonal world. (The German word *zwischenmenschlich*, literally ‘interhuman’, is at once more concrete and more richly associative: ‘The verbal medium of man’s interpersonal world [is] the dialogue.’ ‘Das

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sprachliche Medium dieser zwischenmenschlichen Welt aber war das Dialog', pp. 14–15).

In Renaissance drama (admittedly defined by Szondi through an arbitrary concept of pure or absolute form) dialogue becomes, perhaps for the first time in history, the unique element in the texture of the drama. The prologue, the chorus, the epilogue, have all been set aside. Then dialogue attains a supreme place in the hierarchy of dramatic elements, mirroring interpersonal relations – its proper sphere.

Such a concept of drama strongly emphasises what can only be called the absence of the dramatist from his text: the author does not speak, only the characters. The dramatist does not address the audience directly. (Szondi's view resembles the eloquent definition of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the god-like dramatist remains 'within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails'.)<sup>6</sup> It follows that the words of the dialogue have the feel of being spoken 'out of the situation enacted, and remain within it'. And, in a further development of the argument, drama is seen as 'primary', and dramatic dialogue as 'original' in the sense that it is non-derivative – not a quotation or variation.

The interpersonal concept of dialogue can be taken as a fruitful starting point, for it illuminates the essential link between the *relational and stylistic* features of all dialogue (even though Szondi himself neglects language). It is illuminating, further, to have a strong concept of dialogue – one that sees in dialogue a central and controlling element rather than something secondary, or, worse, decorative and incidental.

Such a view does not commit us to Szondi's doctrine of the pure, absolutely 'closed' and dialogue-centred dramatic form (which is, in my view, too dependent on Hegelian aesthetics as well as on Brecht's polemical arguments against Aristotelian ideas of drama). When drama is approached with such purist *a priori* concepts, no niche is found for Shakespeare's multi-dimensional theatre: for types of play that work through multiple mirrors of genre, perspective and dialogue. Yet what we need is a full spectrum of drama, which can accommodate all the traditional modes of dialogue (starting with the Greeks, and with Shakespeare central), and which can then accommodate experi-

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ment and mutation – new modes of dialogue being created in our own time. Modes of dialogue vary so much: their structures and textures suffer a ‘sea-change’, with the changes of period and genre, changes in the language of the community and in that of the individual dramatist. Nevertheless, they all have an interpersonal function and significance. For wherever there is exchange of dramatic speech, an exchange of persons – of values, attitudes, ‘worlds’ – as well as of structures and styles takes place.

A strong concept of dialogue does not, further, commit us to a doctrine of verbalism or literary supremacy. In this study at least the total sign language of a play – its visual/auditive/tactile effects in performance, the dependence of the lines on acting styles, on the voice, the tones and intonations of the actor – will always be taken into account. Our method leans towards the study of the text as we can only focus on one object at a time; but performance values are constantly kept in mind: *seen* in the text, and, wherever possible, seen and heard in the theatre. A study of dialogue as verbal interaction – both existential and stylistic – can only benefit from any study of the non-verbal elements of drama which illuminates the total sign system of the theatre. It is rewarding to return to the work of the Prague school of semioticians, especially Honzl and Veltruský, and to contemporary scholars as varied in approach as John Russell Brown, J. L. Styan, Keir Elam, Umberto Eco, Tadeusz Kowzan and others.<sup>7</sup> As for the ‘quarrel’ with the post-Artaud defenders of *anti-verbal* theatre (happening, physical action, improvisation, collage, neo-Dada randomness and orgiastic sounds), it need not concern us in this place.

It is more important to grasp that whenever a play has dialogue written into its text (and not just stage directions, or pages with acoustic possibilities calling for noises, cries, whispers and breathing) the proper limits of dialogue become manifest. For the resources of dialogue are not infinite. They may seem so only if viewed ahistorically and unpractically, with the whole ‘imaginary museum’ of drama in mind, rather than the particular struggle for expressive and actable dialogue in one particular playtext. Placed between the rhythmic incantation of ‘music’ and the raw energies of everyday ‘conversation’ – those polar opposites and inseparably paired twins – dialogue may approximate, but never become, either music or conversation.

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'Music' has been placed in scare quotes here, because we are not concerned with music proper in interplay with dialogue proper (the power of song or of the occasional instrument as a stage effect – as in Shakespeare and Brecht) nor with the relation between libretto and score in an opera. That direct kind of interplay requires fine artistic balance from the dramatist, and a fine critical balance in our response; but it presents no special problem in a poetics of dialogue. By contrast, the dream of a musicalised language, a language of sounds, of incantation beyond persons (and beyond 'sense'), does present a problem. Nietzsche was among the first who, still under the hypnotic influence of Wagner, declared that 'tragedy, being a product of the spirit of music, must surely perish by the destruction of that spirit'. 'Music' is 'in the highest degree a universal language' identified with the chorus, the source of pure Dionysiac power, with dithyrambic dance and orgiastic abandon. Dialogue then in effect becomes the enemy of that power, the intrusion of an optimistic Socratic dialectic, dealing in mere ideas and images. If music 'beholds the world of the stage at once infinitely expanded and illuminated from within', then 'what analogue could the verbal poet possibly furnish?'<sup>8</sup>

The nearest parallel to Nietzsche's dream-language in our time is probably the recurrent dream of a language of pure sounds (whether a sublime incantation or a cacophony is not the issue): some language that will free the performers from the intolerable curse of words embedded in syntax, semantic context, and the human struggle for verbal interaction. The babel-language made up of 'pure sound' – not corresponding to any known spoken language – might be one example.<sup>9</sup>

The critical doctrine that regards a play as a continuous 'dramatic poem' may seem a long way from the polar extreme of 'music' *instead of* dialogue. Yet there is a built-in bias against dialogue in the 'dramatic-poem' approach. L. C. Knights – whose famous 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?' (1933) marked a healthy corrective to the excesses of character study in Shakespeare criticism – hardly ever quotes dialogue (and then he discusses its impersonality, its function as choric commentary).<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare criticism is rich in studies that concentrate on themes, on keywords, or symbols and imagery, the 'plums in the plum pudding' of dialogue, while disregarding the full texture of

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the dialogue (its syntax and rhythm, its overall design and its theatricality). When dialogue is discussed at all – as a concept – it tends to get fused with other modes of dramatic speech – the monologue, the set speech, the ritual or group dialogue. Thus Bertram Joseph in *Elizabethan Acting* states: ‘it does not matter whether [Shakespeare] has used speeches that can be interpreted as dialogue, “mental” or “verbal” soliloquy, or the kind of monologue known as “direct address”’.<sup>11</sup> In this approach – what I call the hyper-rhetorical fallacy – the healthy attempt to correct a reductive, naturalistic reading of poetic drama, ends with concepts of dialogue pointing to declamation or verbal music.

At the opposite pole from ‘music’ we find the idea of dialogue as conversation. It might be expected that an interpersonal concept of dialogue would be hospitable to a conversational model; yet I would rather dwell on the distinction between conversation and dialogue – as concept and as practice – than run the risk of blurring the two or, worse still, equating them. The two words had best be kept distinct, with the symbiotic connection between them understood. Apart from casual usage, one keeps finding instances of otherwise precise criticism using the two terms interchangeably. Auerbach points to ‘the conversation between the two sisters’ in *The Antigone* and to ‘a conversation between Prince Henry [and Poinis]’<sup>12</sup> and Northrop Frye defines drama as ‘a mimesis of dialogue or conversation’.<sup>13</sup> Frye’s ‘or’ is not illuminating, and one is tempted to split it into either/or. We then have two competing definitions: *either* ‘drama is a mimesis of dialogue’ (a strongly dialogue-centred definition of drama) *or* ‘dialogue is a mimesis of conversation’. The latter would commit us only to the view that all dialogue mimes conversation in some respects, but not in others; and we are still left with the task of briefly rethinking ‘mimesis’ in this matter of *writing dialogue* with conversation in mind (in the mind of the dramatist, writing *between* the world of speakers ‘out there’ and the performing speakers on stage).

What all interpersonal dialogue mimes is the essential question–answer structure of all conversation – the inescapable need to address and, at some point, respond to another speaker. (We can postpone dealing with the complexities of silence and partial monologue, of Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard* addressing the bookcase and Kaspar – the autistic youth in Handke’s *Kaspar* –

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speaking his one and only sentence to a chair or a table or a broom.) The mimesis of conversational structure, as distinct from its exact verbal texture, may seem obvious enough; yet certain critical practices and controversies have always tended to obscure it. The tendency to think of dramatic *speech* – of the dramatist writing speech, and of this or that character speaking more or less in isolation – tends to disconnect speaker from speaker, and diminish the interactive function, the fully ‘dialogical’ language of encounter. (Even Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, and other paired protagonists tend to find themselves in separate compartments of critical description.)<sup>14</sup> The other tendency is to confuse the question of mimesis (miming the interactive structure of conversation) with the long, in itself significant, debate on the role of naturalistic speech in post-Ibsen drama. As one who has at times been distracted by one or another of these critical tendencies, I may be allowed to report a certain sense of *eureka* on rediscovering the concept of interactive structure – within which dramatic dialogue does ‘imitate’ conversation – without being committed to tape-recording fidelity or verisimilitude in verbal texture.

All types of dramatic dialogue – all kinds of shaping and verbal texture, from stichomythia through blank verse to naturalistic prose – are embraced and illuminated by the interactive concept. Further, wherever we find a dislocation in the personal encounter, we recognise some of the features of mannerist and parodic dialogue – a derangement of relationship as well as of language.

The relationship between two (or more) speakers *as* speakers – the way they interrelate, dominate or balance one another’s speech and the way they exchange value-carrying lumps of language – is in itself a dramatic/theatrical act. (One may note in passing that patterns of verbal exchange are interesting even in languages one does not understand.) The broad audio-visual posture of speakers confronting one another – asking, asserting, promising and so on, within the whole ‘speech act’ – often arrests and demands attention as much as the speech that is individually ‘characteristic’ for a character. Individual speech is often secondary in dialogue written in a univocal or standard language: in the Greek stichomythia and in naturalistic prose dialogue, especially that based on the standard speech of the urban middle class. In all drama differences in social role colour the mode of self-express-



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sion as well as the mode of address, and thus the interplay of speech styles in an encounter. Prince Hamlet, flooded by 'whirling' speech (and in danger of losing his identity through the chameleon-poet's sudden shifts of style) confronts Horatio, a 'normal' speaker (limited by his role, as the confidant of a prince, to almost self-cancelling sparseness in his responses).<sup>15</sup>

While we shall keep, for good reasons, strictly to the study of dialogue in dramatic texts, it is reassuring to know that several directions in linguistics are now concerned with the study of ordinary conversation. It is part of a significant general movement away from the analysis of linguistic structures (for example, the sentence-based paradigm of language in Chomsky and transformation grammar) towards the study of linguistic process or, as Nils Enkvist put it: from the motorway of strict syntax to the scenic road of interactive linguistics. On this wider conceptual map, discourse analysis has a clear bearing on the study of dialogue; while the very names given by Austin and other philosophers to 'the speech act' and to 'performative' utterances point to their relevance to both conversation and to dramatic/theatrical performance.<sup>16</sup> All such concepts focus on what is happening in verbal interaction, on language that functions interpersonally. One may single out H. P. Grice's 'Logic and Conversation' (1975) which establishes a 'co-operative principle' for 'normal' conversation: 'our talk exchanges do not normally consist of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, co-operative efforts; and each participant recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.'<sup>17</sup> One notes that the very idea of an end (*telos*) and the notion of 'logic' takes us back to something that is implied in *dialogos*. At the same time, as might be expected from such a hyper-rational approach to conversation, the maxims of co-operation (useful post-Kantian categories covering the Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner of what is being said) ask us to be, respectively: informative, truthful, relevant and unambiguous. So the co-operative principle – a philosopher's norm for valid conversation in our society – would strongly mark the presence of any irony and of any such figures of speech as metaphor, meiosis and hyperbole. Would not, in the light of such criteria, much dramatic dialogue sound non-co-operative?

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Probably. But one is thankful for a normative principle of conversation, which may enable us to gauge the 'angle of deviation' in any particular dialogue from that ideal or hypothetical colloquy: where speakers are said to be exchanging words (information, appeals, values) in a 'logic' of full co-operation.

The 'mimetic pull' towards conversation is an element in all dialogue – from the Greeks to our own time – for what is actually spoken in the world is a kind of speech-energy that keeps revitalising dramatic dialogue. Total abstraction – as we said concerning 'music' – remains an unattainable aim; nor is it, I think, much to be desired. I would still affirm that 'the dramatist cannot wholly lose touch with everyday speech without sterility'.<sup>18</sup> But, having said that, it seems clear that the uses of a 'conversational model' in the study of dramatic dialogue are relatively limited. The limits are implicit in what might be called the cardinal features of dramatic dialogue, which make it distinct and unique:

(1) The cumulative dialogue. Behind the immediate dialogue sequence lies the totality of the play and its language: the gradual build-up of action, the whole network of motifs, phrases, words repeated till they become keywords – in short, the complex overall dialogue 'behind' each particular dialogue. (It may be objected that the dialogue of an opening scene can hardly be thus underpinned by further dialogue sequences. However, the best opening dialogue – take *Hamlet* again – usually communicates a pressure that anticipates the 'cumulative dialogue', and is presumably written with that in mind: the art of 'coding' dialogue.)

(2) Counter-speech, or the counterpointing of verbal styles whereby the speakers talk to each other in sharply opposed or 'orchestrated' speech-styles: distinct in quantity, shape, texture, and so on.

(3) Acting and reading signals. The audience is being allowed to 'overhear' the dialogue, and in so doing is responding to all the signals written into the play-language. ('Cumulative dialogue' and 'counter-speech' contribute to that system of outward-directed communication.) Even the most participatory (empathy-driven) spectator or reader will enjoy the benefits of 'aesthetic distance': he or she does not have the role of an interlocutor in conversation, or that of a listener silently nodding or shaking his or her head by way of active response, or even the role of one eavesdropping behind the door. The dialogue is written for – and