STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATIONAL RUPTURE IN SAM SHEPARD'S *LA TURISTA*

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Communication is a very delicate matter. Establishing and maintaining a "circuit of communication" --that is, the interchange of messages along an uninterrupted channel between alternating sources and receptors-- is one of the most arduous of our social and interpersonal tasks. Clichés of pop and professional sociology and psychology like "a breakdown in communication", "not getting through to each other", "not on the same wave length", and the like are all metaphors that allude to the problems of communication between individuals and groups as the result of various kinds of inefficiency or rupture in the ideal exchange of messages, whether the latter be vehicles of semantic content (messages as the commerce of information) or as metonymic symptoms of the desire simply to be expressive (poetic discourse) or to establish and maintain human contact irrespective of the exclusive exchange of information (the phatic function of language).

In an ideal communication or speech act, one free of the entropy occasioned by inattention, psychological resistence (i.e., hostility between the speakers), or physical barriers like surrounding noise that hinders conversational exchange, a speaker transmits, in an appropriate code (i.e., a language realized in one of its registers), a message along a channel to a speaker, who has at his disposition the linguistic and pragmatic competence to decode and to interpret the message. If speaker and hearer take turns, a dialogue or conversational takes place, and one form of communication breakdown occurs when there is an interruption in the orderly reversal of the poles of dialogue.

In a neutrally marked pragmatic discourse context, we have what may be described as everyday communication and conversation. In the marked context of a foregrounded monologue, we have speech act events like an irate diatribe or harangue, a political speech, a "natural narrative" like a funny story or the description of something that befell the speaker, the lecture of a parent to a recalcitrant child or the sweet nothings whispered into the receptive ear of one's beloved. In the case of monologic discourses whose structural, rhetorical, and stylistic features impinge on established literary conventions, we have texts that may be considered to be in varying degrees "literary" in nature, forms of poetic expression within the confines of possible speech acts. Texts that we generally classify as "poetry", "fictional narrative", and "essay" are all examples of a sustained verbal discourse that constitutes a form of

"poetic" expression between the implied speaker of the text and an implied receptor (the "implied reader" of certain theoretical postulates).

Although the narrator of fictional texts may report the speech acts of characters in the imaginary world of the narrative (poetry and essays may, of course, also quote the speech acts of individuals other than the narrator; in the case of the former we have typically narrative forms of poetry like the ballad or *romance* and the epic), dramatic texts are specifically characterized by consisting almost exclusively of reported speech: the dramatic work "retransmits" the speech acts --the monologues, the soliloquies, the diatribes, the contrapuntal dialogues-- of the participants in the imaginary world that the theater articulates. In works within the classical tradition of fourth-wall illusionism where the spectators are "voyeurs" vis-à-vis the world on the stage which is, in turn, oblivious to the presence of the audience, a clear-cut distinction is maintained between the dramatist and the spectator on the one hand and the spech universe of the characters on the other. In varieties of modern theater where the otherworldly illusion of the theater is shattered, the narrator may become a participant in his own work (the stage manager of Thorton Wilder's expressionistic works) or the characters may attempt speech acts with the audience, by either simply addressing them or challenging them --often aggressively-- to react to the hypothetical world of the stage (as in the experimental plays of the Malina Beck Living Theater of Off-off Broadway).

Theatrical works are especially interesting paradigms of communication since they involve real human presences, in the form of flesh-and-blood actors, enacting speech events (except, of course, in a pure Artaudian or Grotowskian theater where words may disappear completely and communication is realized via kinesic or other nonverbal codes). Thus, the audience witnesses, like bystanders in the real world, communication events between real persons and may measure --more correctly, may be by implication called upon by the dramatist to assess-- the relative successes or failures in the efforts of the people represented by the actors to initiate, sustain, and effect productive human communication. The theater of Harold Pinter is particularly eloquent in charting the dangerous shoals of human communication, and his work is populated by individuals who have shipwrecked on the barriers to spiritual fulfillment via human communication. Tom Stoppard, the other great English playwright of late-twentieth century drama, is fundamentally concerned with mocking the pretenses, the vacuous strategies, and the woefully inadequate codes of communication (he is especially devastating in his satiric parody of the great "poetic" models of Shakespearean drama).

By the same token, metatheater --dramas that conceive of life itself as a theatrical spectacle in which we enact rather than merely live our human existence-- carries the problematics of communication to a higher exponential power by positing the image of communicational breakdowns between the work and its intended receptor, the audience. After all, the idea of an artistic work that is thoroughly efficient in articulating symbolically the limitations of human communication in the "real" world is certainly a paradox if not an outright contradiction in terms. Thus, it is more "natural" to expect that a work dwelling on threats to adequate human communication be characterized by a problematics in terms of the receptor's adequate decodification of its message: novels like Thomas Pynchon's texts about the absence of symbolic meaning in the detritus of signs that overwhelm our senses must also ultimately resist semantic decodification (i.e., in standard critical parlance, resist reductionary interpretations).

The plays of the American dramatist Sam Shepard are particularly eloquent examples of theatrical texts that postulate the image of fragmented, distorted and failed communication between human beings and that, on a metatheatrical level, are themselves especially dense discourses that challenge to the breaking point the audience's ability to decode or interpret them successfully (in the theater, such a breaking point is the disgusted abandonment of the theater by a spectator in the middle of the play; less extreme is the lament, uttered during intermission between the acts, that "I wish the hell I knew what this play was all about"). *La Turista*, which opened on March 4, 1967 at the American Place Theater in New York, is even more explicit in dealing with the issue of communication, since, as the title indicates, it plays on Americans' psychological anxiety --and often, overt hostility-- in the face of foreign, "alien" culture.

The published text of the play contains the following description, which is essentially the sort of descriptive note that might be contained in the printed program distributed to the playgoer:

> *La Turista* is an allegory. The play is set in hotel rooms in the U.S. and Mexico [second and first acts, respectively]. In the first act Kent and Salem are painfully sunburned. A doctor is summoned when Kent succumbs to "la turista" and the doctor and his assistant exorcize the disease with all the accoutrements of witchcraft including the decapitation of two roosters. In the second act Kent and Salem are back in the States; this time Kent has sleeping sickness and the doctor and his assistant are full of platitudes, self-involvement and useless advice. Kent can no more cope with his primitive disease than he can with his contemporary predicament because cure or waking up is irrational — cure or wake up to what? (back over).

Shepard's use of the lexical item "La Turista" is somewhat curious— indeed, it is perhaps best taken as an emblem of the interpersonal and intercultural confusion that reigns in the work. Although Webster's *Third International Dictionary* registers neither form, it is clear that Shepard's lexical item, characterized by the use of the definite article in the singular, and the form prevalent in the American Southwest on the Mexican border, "turistas" in the plural and without the definite article, are synonymous. Should one not have guessed, the reference is to the onslaught of dyssentary the tourist experiences when traveling abroad and eating unaccustomed foods and drinking water with an unfamiliar chemical and bacterial composition. The term is applied specifically to travel in Mexico, and it is also facetiously known as Montezuma's revenge, in honor of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma (note the process of regressive assimilation between the original form and its interpretation in English) who was killed by the conqueroring Spaniards: the affliction is presumably his revenge for the "invading" tourists. It should be apparent that the whole idea bespeaks the insecurities and anxieties of American's traveling abroad, particularly the middle class which had no experience outside military service with international travel until the 1950s. Mexico was a natural "foreign" land for American tourists to visit, with its promise of exotic foods, cheap accomodations and trinkets, presumed and easy erotic opportunities. The tropical Mexico of midtwentieth century tourism is a binational invention of the Mexican national tourist industry and American travel agents.

At the same time, the tourist Mexico evoked by references to the turistas, la turista, or Montezuma's revenge alludes, if only unconsciously, to the inherent racism that

continues to color American attitudes toward Mexico: the American national consciousness has always felt itself threatened by Mexico because of what is perceived as its totally alien culture, Catholic, insurgent (the Mexican revolution of 1910 came at a time of appaling reactionary isolationism in the U.S.), peasant, and, above all, dark-skinned. Controversies over Mexican illegal immigration in the U.S. since the 1910 revolution and the historical ambiguities concerning U.S. acquisition of the entire Southwestern tier of states contribute to general American hostility toward the truly "foreign" culture that is Mexico. These are all immensely complex issues, but even in the very sketchy form in which I have presented them, it is evident that there is a distinct pattern of intercultural tensions that are potentially productive for purposes of a literary work; c.f., for example, D.H. Lawrence's exploitation of stark cultural contrasts in his *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). (Note that a South American equivalent of the American attitude toward Mexico might be an Argentine's view of Bolivia or Paraguay).

The foregoing may appear to be a rather prolix digression to explain the allusion, in terms of lexical semantics and prevailing cultural codes, of the title of Shepard's work. Nevertheless, it is a crucial understanding, because the drama exploits the semantic productivity of reference to a fundamental American cultural hostility and its concomitant communication-impeding anxieties (that is, psychological anxieties are specific barriers to verbal and other forms of communication between individuals). Throughout the first act, the entire texture of the speech acts between the American couple visiting Mexico and between them and the representatives of Mexican culture whose aid they attempt to enlist in overcoming their gastrointestinal indisposition is predicated on the cultural shock of Mexico for the two tourists. In the second act of the play, when Kent and Salem are back in the United States (in fact, in contradiction to the program note, internal references make it seem like they are on their way to Mexico, but the detail is really of little consequence since chronological sequence is immaterial to the play), the embarrassing foreign malaise is replaced by something more respectable like sleepwalking. But the fact that the patient is attended by a patent-medicine quack of post-Civil War vintage is every bit as culturally alienating as the ministerings of the witchdoctor in the Mexican context. Thus, the first act operates on the basis of the cultural conflict between two different national paradigms, caricatures in terms of the boorish American tourist and the primitive witchdoctor. The second act equally involves cultural conflict, but this time between mid-twentieth century American tourists and mid-nineteenth century American quack medicine. In both cases --and this is what is of primary importance for grasping the principles of the image of human communication in *La Turista*-- what occurs is an overall disruption in the scheme of speech act discourse between the characters of the work. In other words, *La Turista* is a theatrical representation of a discourse universe in which the communication essentially does not take place. Or, what vestiges of communication that does take place are what in Spanish is called a "diálogo de sordos". The degradation between the ideal speech act model of human communication I postulated at the outset of this essay and its "performance token" in *La Turista* is vivid, definitive, and irremediable. The fact that, in the discourse universe of what we call the theater, where the context of the stage is the channel of communication for the audience-receptor and the play is the message encoded in the conventions of drama, the spectator is hard put to understand fully what

is going on only serves to compound the image of human communication that Shepard wishes to portray.

In terms of the actual texture of Shepard's play, what are some of the specific strategies or procedures to assert and confirm this image of ruptured and short-circuited human communication? I would like to concentrate on three as particularly eloquent symptoms of this overall pattern: 1) dialogic discourse that is at cross-purposes: in this case, the speech acts of the participants in a conversation do not fit together to constitute an appropriate exchange of linguistic messages; 2) erratic registers: the unpredictable shifts in registers of style or discourse format foreground the code to the detriment of the message: 3) unannounced shifts in the postulates that underlie the exchange of linguistic units in a discourse text: sentences relate to each other in a text on the basis of anaphoric and deictic processes and, by shifting tenses, mishandling presuppositions, miscuing references and the like, the speaker either deliberately or unconsciously distorts and disrupts communication. In the "real world" of speech acts, arguments between spouses tend to exemplify the first case, while various forms of language play --suddenly introducing an obscene word or scatological reference in a social formula-- may typify irregular handling of registers. The third variety is more complex, but the sort of obfuscation we associate with cynical political speeches, deliberate distortions in the reporting of the news, self-serving governmental communiqués, all are indicative of this category. For example, during the Viet Nam War, one military official justified the bómbing of a civilian target by stating in all earnest that "We had to destroy the town in order to save it [from the Communists]," failing to realize that the semantic matrix of "destroy" (cause to cease to exist) and "save" (cause to continue to exist) are mutually exclusive in the everyday discourse universe we assume to obtain.

For example, during the first act of *La Turista*, Kent is experiencing the discomfort of diarrhea. His wife Salem calls for assistance, and the hotel sends a bellhop Boy. As her own symptoms begin and increase in intensity, the bellhop (whose name evokes the racial condescension used by whites toward anyone they consider "niggers") engages in a travel-guide disquisition on local culture. There is not only a dysphasia in the communication between the two individuals, but the "native boy" speech is radically at variance with that of the American tourist: 1) the latter speaks in a way consonant with the panic of his physical distress, while Boy uses the measured periods characteristic of written language; 2) the tourist, Salem, refers to an immediate physical reality, her diarrhea, while the Mexican speaks in the generalities of social descriptions; 3) Salem is speaking "natural" colloquial English, but the bellhop, whose native language we presume is Spanish, articulates the slightly pretentious prose of written descriptions of foreign cultures. The exchange, which as I have implied is characteristic of the first two of Shepard's textual strategies, is too long to quote in its entirety; here is a representative fragment:

SALEM/ (*Still behind the door [of the bathroom]*) Tell him to do whatever he has to! Don't worry about the money!

BOY / The man here is the most respected of all, or I should say, his profession is. But then, we can't separate a man from his profession, can we? Anyway, there are several witchdoctors for each tribe and they become this through inheritance only. In other words, no one is

elected to be a witchdoctor. This would be impossible since there is so very much to learn and the only way to learn it is to be around a witchdoctor all the time. Therefore the witchdoctor's oldest son, whom you see here, will fall heir to his father's position. He listens carefully and watches closely to everything his father does and even helps out in part of the ceremony as you see here. A great kid. [The visual references are to a witchdoctor and his son who have appeared on stage and, in further disruption of the circuit of communication, Boy fluctuates between sustaining a conversation with Salem and the audience.]

SALEM/ Tell him that I'm sick too and may need some help!

BOY/ The people of the village are very superstitious and still believe in spirits possessing the body. They believe that in some way the evil spirits must be driven from the body in order for the body to become well again. This is why you see the witchdoctor beating the man /Kent/. This is to drive the evil spirits out. The firecrackers are to scare them away. The incense smoke, or copal, as it's called here, is to send the prayers up to the god. They believe the smoke will vary the prayers to heaven. The candles are so that the god will look down and see the light and know that there's somebody praying down here, since the god only looks when something attracts his attention.

SALEM/ I think I've got the same thing! (pp. 25-26).

A further representation of the shifts in linguistic register, with the result that a rupture in communication both occurs and is highlighted by the inappropriateness of the stylistic antiphony between two speakers, is the following exchange. The text implies, by setting the two speeches up in two columns, rather than the ABAB alternation of the turntakers in a "normal" conversation, that the two characters are talking against each other rather than to each other. The doctor uses a phoney rural, folksy register (and, appropriately, he is referred to with the colloquial form Doc); Kent provides a poetic evocation of the doctor as a noble hunter on the rugged frontier of a bygone era:

DOC/	KENT/
Now come back down here and stop playin' around!	The Doctor is torn by desires that cut through his brain as he leads the hysterical mob on the trail of the beast he once loved.
I ain't playin' around anymore!	Now it must be destroyed. If he could somehow get to the beast ahead of the mob. Trap it somehow in a quiet place between smooth wet boulders, and talk to it calmly.
I'll walk right out on ya', boy!	Perhaps even stroke its long hair and wipe off its chin. To find some way of telling the beast that the mob will calm down if *he* only does.
I'd just a' soon let ya' rot away!	(p. 67)

As an example of conversation predicated on the mishandling and discontinuities of the processes of discourse unity, consider the following "conversation" which is a very clever parody of the exchange of semantic information via the illocutionary act of question-and-answer:

KENT/ Now why in the world —I ask myself why in the world would a doctor from a respectable clinic want to disconnect the phone of a dying man. A man he's supposed to cure. A man who's prepared to pay him two suitcases full of money in exchange for his good health. I ask myself why come up with only one answer.

DOC/ Now what would that be?

KENT/ That this doctor is up to no good. That this doctor, in cahoots with his fishy son, is planning to perform some strange experiment on this dying man that he don't want to leak out to the outside world. So if this experiment fails no one will be the wiser, and the only one to have lost anything will be the dying man who's dying anyway.

(*They exchange directions again with Kent advancing and Doc retreating.*)

DOC/ And I ask myself something too. I ask myself why this dying man who's got nothing to lose but his life accusses the one and only person who could possibly save it of such a silly thing as cutting the wires to his telephone. I ask that and come up with only one answer.

KENT/ Yes?

DOC/ That this dying man isn't dying at all. That this here man is aching all over for only one thing. And he cunningly puts the idea into the mind of the doctor, and the doctor then acts it out. The doctor performs the experiment with his faithful son at his side and transforms the dying man into a thing of beauty. (pp. 62-63).

This exchange continues for several more speeches in the same vein. If this speech is parodic of a particular form of illocutionary speech act, it also evokes intertextually a specific discourse circumstance: that of the hard-boiled detective, à la Humphrey Bogart, interrogating his prey by posing questions and then answering them for him, thus putting words into the latter's mouth with the goal of trapping him into a confession. The prey, in turn, mimics this strategy by challenging the detective's allegations by posing his own questions and proceeding to answer them, and so on. This intertextually determined context is explicitly echoed in two lapses in the quoted passage from the otherwise neutrally "good" English of the dialogue: Kent's use of the substandard "he don't" rather than "he doesn't". And the Doc's use of the redundant first-person demonstrative construction (also considered substandard) "this here man" instead of "this man". It is clear that the "normal" structure of question and answer is displaced by a counterpoint of questions that are answered not by the interlocutor, but by the questioner himself, thus denying the proper speech act role of the dialogic partner.

Through *La Turista,* the foregoing patterns of discourse discontinuity, rupture, and displacement are punctuated by wildly inappropriate exhortations to talk, to listen, to pay attention. Specifically, the Doc's proposed cure for Kent's sleeping sickness is to talk, as though the mere articulation of language were a miraculous panacea for the most terryfying of physical illnesses:

KENT/ Haa! Your hands are something, boy. Fast hands.

SONNY/ He talks.

DOC/ Good, good. Keep him going. Keep him talking.

KENT/ Don't have screwy knuckles like that just playing hand ball or something. Hand ball you use the palm. But bloody knuckles. Wowee.

SALEM/ What?

DOC/Don't worry. Give him these pills when you get a chance, but let him talk. (p. 48).

But clearly such imperatives to talk merely for the sake of talk as a form of medical therapy are little more than mere babble, and the logorrhea that the quack doctor encourages in the second act is a symptomatic displacement of the diarrhea the witch-doctor pretends to cure in the first act. In neither case does speech or its structured configurations as the discourse of human communication serve any purpose other than as a manifestation of meaninglessness, of the impossibility of human communication through speech.

Sam Shepard's *La Turista*, as an example of dramatic literature, could easily be homologized with everyday speech or with the natural narrative that William Labov studies as a "paraliterary" form of everyday speech. Considered as simply a very special, a particularly "artistic", example of discourse patterns, the play could be submitted to the sort of formal dissection characteristic of technical studies in the area of discourse analysis. While the formal analysis of literary texts as subcategories of everyday speech acts amplifies the corpus of text linguistics, it does not contribute very much to our understanding of the work as literary discourse. The proper goal of interfacing literature and linguistic --in this case, specifically text linguistics or discourse analysis-- is to assimilate to the study of literature serviceable insights of linguistics that may contribute to our understanding of the overall structural configurations of the artistic text. This analysis of *La Turista* began after a brief synthesis of speech act models, to consider the general outlines of Shepard's play, particularly its concern with various forms of communication, interpersonal, cultural, and theatrical. By proceeding to focus on specific issues of discourse dysphasia in *La Turista* we were, subsequently, able to identify fundamental textual strategies that the dramatist makes use of in order to confirm the overall degradation of human communication Shepard's play articulates. It is in this fashion that an understanding of speech act theory may make an invaluable contribution to our critical analysis of literary and dramatic texts.

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