

SPIRITUAL AND CORPOREAL NATURE OF BODY IN DRAMA THE SEAGULL OF ANTON P. CHEKHOV

The paper focuses on the interpretation of gestures in the drama *The Seagull* perceived as the specific Chekhovian language which sometimes turns out to be more meaningful than the verbal sphere of his plays. We analyse *behavioural sphere* of the characters in relation to the concept of *spiritual nature of the body* described by A. Lowen and come to the conclusion that economical kinetics in Chekhov's plays constitutes one of the features which allows the poetics of the Russian playwright to be described as *the poetics of negation*, poetics of denying. It seems that the most adequate metaphor of the Chekhovian gesture could be the Lotman's notion of *the meaningful absence* emphasizing the potential of the work which cannot reach its highest levels, the stimulus for the deepened analysis of the text.

Gestures in everyday life are associated mainly with the motion of the body accompanying the speech, they emphasise spoken words and very often substitute the word which confirms the meaning of gestures, changes or contradicts them. Sometimes even such an economical movement as a nod becomes meaningful and essential for the plot. In visual arts, particularly in painting, *the gesture* turns into an all-powerful sign building the language of this discipline of artistic expression. Theatre as the art of the broad context puts gesticulation in the fluctuating field of the continuously changing senses. This value of the openness – one would like to say of the open being – is confirmed during each performance, which becomes the moving record of the unrepeatable (because it is impossible to repeat it or copy as it happens in case of a film tape) emotional states of the characters participating in the theatre show addressed to audience coming from different social backgrounds. The member of the audience, who was to be aware of his or her essential role, constituted one of the most crucial categories of the period of the Great Theatre Reform, whose brave and innovative concepts initiated the theatrical breakthrough at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The audience in the same degree as the actor was to become the creator of an art performance, his properly directed process of perception of the work of art was to start a show, in a sense, simultaneously with the gesture of the artist.

At present, the kinetic sign plays, first of all, the role of the medium of the psychological expression, it is the essential part of the multi-level structure of the work of art, in which gestures usually create inseparable and consistent dramatical chains [1]. Sequences of stage movements attributed to certain heroes can define the groups of characters connected by similar moral attitude or turn attention to character oppositions individualising the heroes or constituting the source of the humour in the drama. Sometimes a trivial kinetic signal can recreate complicated psychological processes. Irena Slawinska, the acknowledged Polish researcher of the drama genre, mentions also *the test gestures* constituting a kind of trial for certain heroes, *exposing gestures* or elements of the intended life theatricalisation, which – if we may continue the cited opinion – not only change the atmosphere in the drama but also focus the attention on the audience making them the meaningful factor of the performance, putting to life the literary record of the piece of the text [2]. Gesticulation associated with stage props should also be added to the aforementioned functions of the gestures as it often provokes a new situation, occupies hands and constitutes the focus of attention in the drama. On the one hand, the gesture presents itself as something real and necessary at a given moment, the factor of the drama setting, on the other hand, however, it creates the metaphorical level of the play and builds up the deep meaning of the work of art sometimes contradicting the temporal sphere, making up the opposition to events and words in dialogues [3].

In this article I would like to focus on *the behavioural sphere* of the heroes in the drama of A.P. Chekhov *The Seagull* considered in relation to the concept of *the spiritual nature of the body* described by A. Lowen, an American psychiatrist and psychotherapist, who based his findings on existential psychology, deep ecology and eastern and western philosophy [4]. The assumptions of his body method shall allow the examination of the problem of the body and gesture from the angle of the psyche concentrating on the holistic approach to

the human being, as a result of which *the body* is treated as the spirit stimulated by the psyche overseeing its activity. A. Lowen drawing on medical observations of W. Reich and J. Pierrakos claims that the body should be understood as the separate self-relying energetic system co-reacting with the environment and dependant on it. According to him the analysis of the body dynamics cannot exclude emotions which become the direct expression of the spirit developed by experiences. It seems that such an academic perspective enables also to broaden the meaning of the category of the theatrical gesture and define its function more precisely, which allows focusing more specifically on the holistic development of the heroes and examining their physical and spiritual relationships. At the same time, discussing *The Seagull* – the work which was written at the turn of the 19th and 20th century – demands taking into account the achievements of the artists of the Great Theatre Reform who carried out experiments aimed at defining the parameters of the ideal actor's body. Undoubtedly, the best example of the above is *the biomechanics* of V. Meyerhold or the artistic attempts of A. Tairov who tried to emphasize the unity of both spheres, i.e. the spirit and the body.

In this context the anti-dramatic nature of A.P. Chekhov's plays constitutes one of the features which allow describing the poetics of the Russian playwright as *the poetics of negation*, poetics of denying. Thinking about the definition of the function of *the theatrical* gesture in the drama *The Seagull* it seems essential to work out the role of the Chekhovian vagueness, his juxtapositions of totally different elements, which can be understood only as the manifestation of one unity full of contrasts. The lack of typical drama genre parameters expected by the audience which is so characteristic for the discussed work, «the lack of the plot», the economy of words are all the elements which justify the assumption that the appropriate way to transcode Chekhov's dramas would be the Chekhovian philosophy of denial contained in them, looking for contradicting and opposing elements, discovering information included in negation and juxtaposing parallels such as obvious-hidden, dream-reality etc. It seems that the juxtaposition of this specific feature of the poetics with Lotman's notion of *the meaningful absence*, which could emphasize the potential of the work which is not able to reach its highest levels, could become the stimulus for the deepened analysis of the text, expose the potential of the hidden reality of the play, discover the meaning accumulated somewhere in the depths of the text. This thesis could also be justified by the specific Chekhovian symbolism based in a sense on «burning» and «destroying» the symbol, reducing it to the level of the allegory due to which the constructive dominant feature of the drama becomes its orientation towards an engaged reader who is able to explore «the inexpressible» [5].

I would like to begin the discussion aimed at defining the specifics of the Chekhovian *theatrical gesture* with turning attention to the repeatable gestures which can be considered the emblems of the heroes. This opinion can be proved not only by the examination of *The Seagull* but also by the analysis of other Chekhovian plays. For example, the characteristic kinetics is also present in *Three Sisters* in which Solony all the time sprinkles himself with perfume as if he wanted to hide something, Tchebutkin never parts with daily papers, which is his way of keeping the world at a distance and Fedotik spends time taking pictures and buying childish and surprising presents. The repeatable gesture covers the emptiness of the dramatic characters and defines them. On the one hand, it oversimplifies their personalities, on the other, however, it points at their wasted spiritual potential, unfulfilled opportunities. For the virtual audience the recurring gesticulation can become a specific matrix, the sign of the absence of decoded meaning, which makes them search for some depth hidden in the absence.

Analysing the recurrence of certain theatrical gestures one could risk the opinion that the image of *the body* of the heroes of *The Seagull* constitutes the opposition of the harmonious ideal described by A. Lowen. The nature of leitmotifs seems to show the lack of the natural grace or pleasure associated with the body. Observations of the behavioural sphere prove rather tensions in the characters' bodies, the absence of *physical vitality* related to their psyche. The confirmation of the above opinion in the discussed drama can be proxemics and behaviour of Sorin or the anaemic gesticulation of Masha made up by her apathetic way of walking, drinking vodka or dancing waltz in silence. Her *theatrical gesture* can be treated as a subtle sign of pathological and badly contained aggression covered by her ostensibly phlegmatic character. The analysis of similar mental conditions carried out by A. Lowen shows that unexpressed emotions usually accumulate in the body in the form of the absence of natural flexibility, which proves the denial of life affirmation and body integration [6]. The firm decision not to give in to emotions and weaknesses makes the body stiff, becomes the form of protest against life and people, disturbs the natural rhythm and decreases the level of body energy and stimulation. Explaining the thought of A. Lowen one could say that the man in such a situation is able to control everything, he learns to use his willpower, which, however, does not allow him to enjoy simple achievements, leads to disharmony between the head and the motion of the body, between thinking and feeling. The person is not

aware that the only thing to overcome becomes then the fear of life itself accumulated in the body which makes it less and less flexible. If Masha's gesticulation was attributed such a motivation it could be assumed that the behaviour of the heroine loses its spontaneity and credibility to the reader, becomes mechanical and trained, expresses her social isolation and concentration only on the intellectual side of human existence.

The source of this kind of disharmony could be the inner pain or suffering, focusing on which can exclude the man from the routine rhythm of life, reduce his sensitivity and put him in the specific static ecstasy of pain. This approach seems to resonate ideologically with the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, which undoubtedly constituted the basis for the creative experiments of the Great Theatre Reform, being in a sense the opposition of Dionysiacal concept of ecstasy derived from the excess of joy and the Completeness of the Cosmos [7]. From this point of view, suffering and pain could be regarded as positive values, contemplation of which prevents new desires which are continuously generated by the fulfillment. Masha's melancholy and her apathetic gesture could be viewed in this context as a specific game referring the reader to the idea of the Completeness in relation to which the Dionysiacal sacrifice «resembles the Janus's head, whose face is simultaneously laughing and crying» [8]. The concept of the Dionysiacal excess links pain and joy, combines the ecstatic self-destruction and redeeming suffering into one unity. The semantic capacity of the eternally relevant symbol of Dionysus would create the opportunity to notice in him also the features of suffering Christ immersed in the ecstasy of death [9]. The broad range of associations spontaneously coming to mind in this context allows treating Masha's gesture as the sign reviving the potential of cultural contexts hidden in it, defining the opportunity of their deep studies and also showing continuous relevance of mythical inspirations of the times of the Reform.

The open nature of the literary text, which is transcoded by the interpreter, is built up in the Chekhov's drama also by the symbolism of trivial activities, often neglected during the process of text perception by the reader. The insightful analysis of *the theatrical gesture*, which is constructed by its *meaningful absence*, and the kinetic recurrence can lead to the association with the rhythmic motion of the pendulum metaphorically present in the text in the repetitive action of entering and leaving the stage by the heroes, their arrivals and departures, opening and closing of different things. The lack of logic, dichotomy and contradictions are naturally encoded in these gestures, which can turn the attention of the interpreter again to the Dionysiacal concept of the Completeness of the World and its negative realization. Theatrical experiments of the period of the Great Theatre Reform – one could mention here at least the artistic achievements of L. Andreev or A. Blok – show that the Dionysiacal concept of the Completeness of the Cosmos is connected not only with the ecstatic activity resulting in life transformation but the element of «ever-lasting creation» finds its realisation also in permanent decline and self-destruction. The metaphor of the pendulum, i.e. permanent encoding through the repetitiveness of the images, could therefore mean the attempt of the visualization of the spiritual desires of the heroes, constitute the element whose associative reading could enable the broader view of the reality. As a result, it could be treated as the parallel of the Chinese *mandala*, the pattern used to search for life balance, reflecting the effort accompanying the process of building the internal and external harmony by the human being. From this point of view *the theatrical gesture* would reach the status of the formula organizing the chaos and spiritual complexity of the hero, the structure expressing the overall character of the world.

The image of the pendulum projecting itself at the interpreter during the process of the analysis of the heroes' gesticulation can continuously reveal the hidden meaning of metaphysical content. One should not neglect in this context the interpretative key of Schopenhauer's writings, which present the life as the continuous fluctuation between pain and monotony, needs and their fulfillment, desire and suffering [10]. According to the German philosopher the tragic nature of the individual fate lies in being permanently entangled between those opposing phenomena, between the past and the future. Translating the philosophical language of Schopenhauer into the senses building up Chekhov's world it seems justified to claim that the willpower makes the man possess and destroy at the same time, makes people suffer in order to free them from suffering, creates life just to finish it. «Death and life – in the opinion of the German thinker – belong to life in the same degree, they keep each other in balance by mutual interdependence, constitute polar opposites of life completeness, which function as correlation» [11]. The aspect of that monotony of the pendulum motion, repetitiveness and parallel coexistence of opposed values in Schopenhauer's philosophy could also be associated with Nietzsche's philosophical system emphasizing the dual nature of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements or the findings of Bergson, who believed in the dominant role of intuition over the intellect, which constituted one of the main inspirations of the Great Theatre Reform.

The pendulum nature of the heroes' activities, economy of their gestures and events which take place behind the scene harmonise in a way with the pauses appearing in the text of *The Seagull*, with the silence of the characters and their unfinished utterances. The aforementioned tools build up so called second bottom of the text, which is characterised by the process of replacement, continuous transformation of the physical sphere through spiritual categories. Consequently, the gesture seems to play the role of the pause, as described by L.M. Borisowa, separating real thoughts of the Chekhovian hero from the text which is actually uttered on stage [12]. The gesture becomes the sign of the silence which can be experienced, reveals the features of *the internal man* concealed in *the external speech*. The pause – according to the aforementioned researcher – is also the medium of slowing down the action of the drama, which starts to concentrate mainly on the inner world of the hero who seeks justification. Similar functions can be attributed to *the gesture*, which is distinguished from the flow of words and constitutes the focus of attention of the interpreter, escapes the control of the heroes and shows motivations and feelings which are often not realised by the characters.

The confirmation of this opinion could be the scene of plucking the petals from the flower by Treplev, which is aimed at answering the question whether Nina loves him or not. This activity based on folk tradition becomes the explosion of his anger against his mother and the sign of silent protest. The cases of similar behaviour were often analysed by A. Lowen who perceived them as the expressions of emotions which people are not aware of, especially of fear, anger and sadness [13]. In his opinion those feelings reflect the impulse of engagement or withdrawal from life, which consequently express the strive for pleasure or fulfillment, fear or expectation of pain. Using Lowen's terminology one could say that Treplev by the destruction of the flower informs the audience about his fears, unconsciously wants to deliver a blow in order to block the pain which is going to appear in his life, and then withdraw, metaphorically close himself in the cave of his life. As a result, the hero expresses also the symptoms of the inner disharmony, his hidden disease of the neurotic nature. This worsening pathological state of Treplev's mind could also be considered the projection of the fears of A.P. Chekhov who was often afraid of his future, of going bankrupt and losing his creative potential. The main character of the drama also tries to deal with the difficulties of his life vocation, although he runs out of patience and kills himself in the end as he is not able to bear the burden of being an artist as Nina is. Treplev's gesture in the view of Lowen's concept of *the spiritual nature of the body* could be interpreted as the sign of his inner weakness, which is also revealed in his lack of emotional independence, his inability to start relationships or in his creative impotence.

The pathological tension encoded in *the theatrical gesture* of the characters of *The Seagull* is very often the reason for their comical body language. The most evident in this area is Medvedenko behaving like a puppet, playing the role of Masha's husband in spite of her disrespectful treatment. Although submissive gesticulation of Medvedenko who quietly crosses the stage and tries to make himself «invisible» makes the reader laugh it proves to be the sign of his life tragedy and his inability to fight with the fate. It seems justified to claim that his life experience, sadness and anger accumulated in his body take over him, metaphorically «drag him down». Medvedenko by humiliating himself probably wants to anticipate the pain, by containing his feelings wants to avoid them. This association brings to mind Lowen's concept of grounding which describes the relationship of the individual with the ground, which is treated here as his fundamental reality [14]. When the author of the theory of *the spiritual nature of the body* claims that a certain person is well grounded it means that he knows his identity, has control over basic life areas, i.e. the body, sexuality and people, which metaphorically means that he is joined with those aspects in the same degree as with the ground [15]. This kind of relationship is the source of power and confidence in life, which is reflected in the naturally straightened body posture. Fear is the reason for cringing, bending forward and depression. Trying to diagnose the theatrical gesture of Medvedenko according to Lowen's standards it can be noticed that the hero is not properly grounded, his spirit is dead, the body lacks stimuli as the teacher is not able to enjoy it. One could metaphorically say that Masha's husband buries his head in the sand and denies the reality, which makes him less and less confident whereas his body becomes less and less flexible. Encoded mechanical habits of the body can be also noticed in the gesticulation of Dorn, who is one of most passive heroes in the drama *The Seagull*. His passivity is not the expression of the calm man who found his fulfillment in life, his gestures, sometimes contrary to his words, show the decrease of vitality reflected in his emotional isolation and his role of the commentator of the events rather than the participant.

Holding back emotions and lack of deep feelings, which can be noticed not only in Dorn's behaviour, are emphasised by the tensions accumulated in the heroes' bodies, they are the factor building up the specific inability of the characters of the Chekhovian drama. According to R.L. Jackson those heroes, especially Treplev,

are not able to take responsibility for their actions or accept suffering in order to become true tragic heroes [16]. C.A. Flath agreeing with the above opinion adds that Treplev could be called the Russian Hamlet, i.e. the hero who is burdened with the riddle of his life but not capable of solving it, he is far less conscious than the tragic Shakespearean hero [17]. His passivity – in the opinion of the academic – is directly related to the activity of Konstantin's mother. The heroes' inability, in a broader sense, could also be treated as the metaphor of differences between the world of ideas existing only in imagination and their incarnation, always limited by the temporary output.

The scarcity of the heroes' gesticulation would then hide the unused mental and physical potential of the characters, their slow loss of energy in situations when it could be used for dynamic body activities. This correlation can be well illustrated by Chekhovian saying *sręda zajędaję* which reminds of the habits deeply ingrained in the environment, the codes of conduct and routinely accepted solutions which determine the behaviour of the heroes [18]. The environment, because of inexplicable reasons, suppresses the enthusiasm of the heroes, kills initiative and does not allow them to implement their plans and dreams. It is a kind of metaphorical frame which the characters cannot cross. This specific Chekhovian «resistance of matter», which cannot be explained, is also reflected in the words of the characters whose natural biological cycle of life is disturbed, the heroes make each other tired, they have problems with breathing, they cannot sleep. Consequently, the verbal layer of the drama supplements the picture of the heroes' physical problems accumulated in their bodies. The way of the heroes' movement and the corporeal nature of their bodies could be interpreted in *The Seagull* as the deformed reflection of the ideal which is possible to be achieved only in the spiritual world.

The aforementioned brief attempt to signal the possible ways of the interpretation of the heroes' gestures in the drama *The Seagull* seems to justify the claim that the limited and economical body language of the characters constitutes the specific Chekhovian language building the content of the text, sometimes much more meaningful than the verbal sphere which is very often replaced by it. *The theatrical gesture* may be treated as a basic tool, specific interpretative key allowing transposition of the information hidden in the text, generated in the creative process of the realization of the work. The potential audience focused on the analysis of the gesticulation is able to cross the threshold of the temporary, reach the elusive reality put to life due to his or her own intellectual activity. Lotman's concept of *the meaningful absence* metaphorically representing the lack of the sign which is crucial for the content, and in case of the Chekhovian characters their intended kinetic «economy» and «loss of energetic potential», could bring to mind the concept of «the hollow» as the opposing equivalent of the Dionysiacal surplus, transformation derived from the power of the ritual orgy. It would probably make clearer the symbol of the pendulum as the expression of the behavioral sphere of the heroes, in a sense permanently representing the link between opposing values. They find their realization through the dichotomic nature of the characters or the repeatable gestures of reaching and withdrawing.

This type of analysis somehow automatically leads us to the aesthetics of the Great Theatre Reform whose main focus was the category of the active audience engaged in the process of the interpretative ritual and the problem of divergences between the ideal and the specific realization of the work. It seems that this issue, which was particularly interesting for G. Lukács in the context of the tension existing between the intention of the director and the real possibility of the stage realization of the modern drama, could also be related to the literary version of the work [19]. The prospect of the text specification through the insight into *the theatrical gesture* realized by the category of the meaningful absence would focus the general meaning of the work on its inability to find the fulfillment, on the inadequacy of each interpretation in comparison with the vision existing in imagination. *The negative gesture* in the drama of Chekhov would get then double motivation. It could be treated as a temporary tool used by the interpreter transcoding the text and also as the ideal hidden in a dream, represented by its imperfection.

1. I. Slawinska, *Sceniczny gest poety – zbior studiow o dramacie*, Cracow 1960, p. 41.

2. *Ibidem*, p. 54.

3. J. Lipinski, *Mimika i gest*, «Dialog» 1970, nr 10, p. 95-105.

4. A. Lowen, *Duchowosc ciała*, translated by S. Sikora, Warsaw 1994, p. 25-26.

5. X. Халациньска – Вертеляк, *Культурный код в литературном произведении. Интерпретация художественных текстов русской литературы XIX и XX веков*, Poznan 2002, p. 123-133.

6. A. Lowen, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

7. J. Tuczynski, *Schopenhauer a Młoda Polska*, Gdansk 1969, p. 168.