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Krzysztof Dmitruk

The Active Public

The poetic *Epistles* of Horace offer the historian of literary communication some extremely interesting material. We will concern ourselves here only with matters directly linked with the title of our paper. In the year 23 B.C. Horace wrote in the *Epistle to the Pisos*:

The flute – not, as now, bound with brass and a rival of the trumpet, but slight and simple, with few stops—was once of use to lead and aid the chorus and to fill with its breath benches not yet too crowded, where, to be sure, folk gathered, easy to count, because few—sober folk, too, and chaste and modest. But when a conquering race began to widen its domain, and an ampler wall embraced its cities, and when, on festal days, appeasing the Genius by daylight drinking brought no penalty, then both time and tune won greater licence. For what taste could you expect of an unlettered throng just freed from toil, rustic mixed up with city folk, vulgar with nobly born?¹

This fragment contains two ideas that deserve particular attention. Thus above all there appears the notion that until relatively recently the public remained close-knit and homogeneous. The whole text is shot through with a nostalgia for the times when these small (nowadays we would without doubt add the term “highly integrated”) groups of recipients gathered around a stage that gave forth moderate and measured words and tones. Even at this early date the source of disturbances in communication is discovered to lie in the processes of democratization and urbanization, in demographic changes and shifts in mores. Nevertheless, a technical innovation was held to have played an equal part in the demise of the old-time harmony:

¹ Horace, *Ars Poetica* or *Epistle to the Pisos*, [in:] *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, transl. H. Rushton Fairclough, London 1926, pp. 467–469.

this is the brass stop that closed the apertures of the flute. From this moment on, those in possession of “horses, property and a noble sire” were to be scandalized by spectacles addressed both to them and to “the buyers of roasted beans and chestnuts.”² Many years later we can read in a book by Maurice Descotes that in the Middle Ages the public was still homogeneous and “in a certain sense”—the ideal. Here too there appears the enchanting vision of the collective life of bygone cities, whose inhabitants are said to have wept in common during dramatizations of the sufferings of Christ and to have split their sides laughing at a farce. Not until the Renaissance was this unity shattered and the new type of popular public born—“the paying public.”³ All of a sudden, everything becomes complicated. In the course of the same drama, one section in the audience weeps, another laughs, whilst some preserve the cool scepticism by which one knows the expert. Within one chamber there is a conflict of differing tastes and ethics and needs.⁴

Auerbach shifts the date of the birth of the public to the 17th century—strictly speaking, to the years after the death of Cardinal Mazarin and the first period in rule of Louis XIV. The new community arose from a fusion of the nobility (“the estate that had no function, but possessed the trappings of power all the same”) with a part of the third estate, which “fled” its class and ceased to produce and provide. The two groups met and were one in their “parasitic uselessness and ideal of culture.”⁵ Over and above the estates there emerged an intellectual framework that ensured a relatively high degree of integration.

Sartre however finds the 17th century still brimming with harmony and agreement. He uncovers the destruction of this unity in the 18th century, but for all this situates the birth of the new—bourgeois—public in the following century. Sartre opposes to the “active public” that belongs to “good society” the passivity of the bourgeois public. His somewhat wild metaphor of copulation defines the essence

² *Ibidem*, p. 471.

³ M. Descotes, *Le Public de théâtre et son histoire*, Paris 1964, pp. 25–26.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 17–19.

⁵ E. Auerbach, “La Cour et la ville,” [in:] *Vier Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Französischen Bildung*. Bern 1951.

of this distinction as follows. The relationship between the new bourgeois public and its author reminds the creator of *Situations* of intercourse between the female and the male: she “asks to be raped and impregnated.”⁶ The older public, by contrast, is more hermaphroditic, inseminating itself, and doing so in a manner both elegant and conflict-free. For it is capable of writing well itself, and expects nothing new of the author. Conversely, the bourgeois public—as Sartre demonstrates—constitutes a single immense “expectation”, a peculiar variety of void that requires to be filled.⁷

It is not our intent here to document the dispute concerning the genealogy of the public, nor to present a history of that public’s transformations. In any case, the dispute is wide-spread and inveterate, touching on both general matters and a host of particular problems. It is often less a question of the genesis of the public than of ascertaining the moment at which it lost the character of a homogeneous community.⁸ Many researchers stress the crucial role of the 18th century (R. Escarpit, Raymond Williams⁹), whilst for a certain group of them, everything of significance in this area stems from Romanticism.

Let us repeat: we are not concerned with dates. The fact worthy of attention in and of itself is that attempts at thinking the totality of collective items involved in the literary exchange are accompanied by an abandonment of the view that grants the primary status to the literary text. Obviously, the parameters applied in the description of the social position of such texts are not the categories of text-immanence. Nor do they derive from the array of instruments devised to examine the processes and psychological mechanisms of

⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, London 1967, p. 116.

⁷ *L. c.*

⁸ Compare S. Żółkiewski’s remarks on the conceptions of R. Mayo, Q. D. Leavis, P. Ramsey etc. in “Pola zainteresowań współczesnej socjologii literatury” (The Concerns of Contemporary Sociology of Literature), [in:] *Kultura – socjologia – semiotyka literacka (Culture – Sociology – Literary Semiotics)*, Warszawa 1979.

⁹ R. Williams, “Społeczna historia pisarzy angielskich” (The Social History of English Writers); R. Escarpit, “Literatura a społeczeństwo” (Literature and Society), [in:] *W kręgu socjologii literatury (In the Field of Literary Sociology)*, ed. by A. Mencwel, Warszawa 1977.

reception. In each of the examples already quoted the factors in question were macro-sociological: the structural changes in the area of production and consumption, the processes that replace elites, the development of communication's technology, ecological events etc. The connections between the public and the overarching social system were arranged in a complex manner. It is worth recalling not only the disposition of forces in the auditorium of the theatre of Molière, but also the nature of the stage in Elizabethan England, in which bourgeois authors, bourgeois players and a bourgeois repertoire were maintained by the monarch and the aristocracy concentrated around her. Louis XIV deployed the theatre in a socio-technical manner: with the help of the transparent language of theatrical behaviour in a differentiated auditorium, he carried out sophisticated political manoeuvres. One should not overestimate the importance of these fleeting alliances or exaggerate the degree of the unity achieved; nevertheless, one should admit that at that time there arose a situation that was new, something more than a simple extension of the social divisions of power and property. All in all, one can say that after its fashion the public participated in the conflicts of the epoch—and that at times these conflicts were the fundamental ones.

In reflections on the sociology of literature an Horatian optics prevails. Consequently, the role of structural and technological factors is stressed, the composition of the public is determined, and modes of handling messages are defined. Diachronic thinking establishes a scale of growing complexity in the collectivity of signs, and connects this problem with the growth in size of auditoria, with alterations in the communicative power of particular technologies, and with transformations in cultural sub-systems. One can enumerate without difficulty the nodes around which the public, thus-conceived, crystallizes. It collects around: a) the means of transmission, b) the message, c) the sender, d) the communications system, e) social institutions, and finally, f) itself. Thus we have a public that reads and listens, the public of folk tableaux and *The Marriage of Figaro*, of Shakespeare and Goethe, a literary and a cinematographic public, the public of the aristocratic or bourgeois salon or that of the conspiratorial organization etc. In each case, and as Escarpit believes, the public bears the consequences of exceeding its own "critical mass"—ma-

nipulative dimension—that is, the small group that makes possible various and immediate forms of contact.¹⁰ These conceptions suggest that the main role of the community is purely receptive. The functions of the public appear to dissolve at the moment at which contact with the text is broken. The reader stops reading and is transported from the position of member of a real public to a state of temporary relaxation—to the region of expectation occupied by the potential public. The next bout of reading forges the links anew, and once again the sociologist makes the appropriate classifications: who, what, where, when, how many times...

All this constitutes a very wide-spread way of presenting the matter. The attraction of this approach lies in the fact that here everything can be determined and measured. In this respect it has rung up its greatest successes in the sociology of the theatrical public. The institution of the theatre extends its activity into a broadly ranging actuality. This is why one can introduce the parameters concerning the technical frontiers of communication (visibility and audibility), the problems of architecture and auditorium lay-out, and the problems of the size, division, composition and positioning of the audience. Analyses display significant distinctions between the sociology of the parterre and that of the box, between afternoon *matinée* and Sunday morning publics, between the regular public and the seasonal one, and between the organized public and the crowd etc.¹¹ There are few obstacles to catching the theatrical public “in the act.” Not only can one check the attendance and measure the levels of consumption—one will even succeed in drawing up a graph of enthusiasm, coolness and reserve. The richness of the form of expression is the researcher’s natural ally. Thus a multitude of cultic patterns, modes of adoration, of protests, brawls and disorders, become subject to description. One cannot but envy the theatrologist. For the groups he analyzes are formally isolated, enclosed in the auditorium like rats in a cage, and patiently submissive to the gamut of his cognitive operations.

The literary public is ecologically dispersed: more often than not it engages in its activity in a manner that is discreet and elusive.

¹⁰ Escarpit, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

¹¹ Cf. Escarpit, *op. cit.*

Observed data are usually of little interest and generally lead to banal conclusions. The methodological inventiveness of the researcher commonly goes no further than diagrams and barren statistics. For all that, we do not consider the object itself to have attained a form that fits it for such operations. Let us recall that in another paper we clearly distinguished the category of the public understood as a tool for ordering research into the phenomena of literary reception and the form of representation of readerly activity. Thus one is not required to employ this category in analysis of the process of reading, of styles of reception, and of the functions and types of readerly behaviour. We wrote then that the public exists on a different plane than that of readerly events and simple acts of communication.¹² It would be worthwhile exploiting the category of the public on a larger scale than has been done hitherto, so as to examine those forms of literary communication which otherwise could not be observed or described at all. We have in mind above all those activities that are not characterized by intimacy with the text. Up to now our research habits and stereotypes have discouraged such reflections. Only the exceptional paper concerns itself with such behaviour, and even in these cases it is relegated to the corpus of "subsidiary roles" that accompany the primary literary task. Thus the matter calls for a fundamental exposition, which we will keep as brief as possible.

According to the view we are adopting, the literary public is conceived of as a society of a special type.¹³ Obviously, the functioning of this society is connected with (we eschew the word "depends on") systems of communication and with the level of technology with which the literary market is endowed. It seems however that equal importance belongs to the situational framework that ensures people an indispensable degree of freedom of association, interchange of opinion, and circulation of information, persons and things. If a dispute over the date of birth of modern signifying communities is

¹² K. Dmítruk, "Literatura – komunikacja – publiczność" (Literature – Communication – Public), *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 1978, fasc. 4.

¹³ This notion is quite an obvious one, and is developed relatively frequently. Cf. for instance M. Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature*, Oxford 1972, p. 195.

unavoidable, we need not be thrown back on abstract speculations. Common sense tells one to support those researchers who stress the significance of the French Revolution (K. Mannheim) and of the conception of informational liberalism that stems from the spirit and economic ideas of Locke. We can find the new state of affairs expressed in articles 10 and 11 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* of 1789.¹⁴ The right to knowledge about oneself and the world, and the right to information become as important in the modern age as the right to bread and work.

We are concerned with a signifying collectivity that knows it is a public and wishes (or does not wish) to remain one. We are not interested here in the case of Mr. Jourdain, who had to be told that his activities belonged to a system and already had a name. We propose that the term "the active public" be adopted: a term related only in part to the Sartrean formulations quoted earlier. Our understanding of the word "active" derives from a different tradition. This word functions within the confines of a theory of organizations and situates itself in the field marked out by the works of Weber, Barnard, Simons, Etzioni, Kernal, and others. The term refers to a comprehensive theory of "the active society," within which the largest groups participate in public life and so realize a multitude of shared values.¹⁵ "To be active is to react," writes Etzioni.¹⁶ This theory also implies that the values that constitute the object of the activities of these particular groups do not function solely by means of the classic form of verbal statement. The collectivity creates mediating structures for them, thereby stabilizing the labile domain of axiological beings. In this fashion there arises a "reality of activity" located between the world of symbols and the world of nature. It is inhabited by the objectified traces of the activities of past generations, and by the recent results of the acti-

¹⁴ F. Balle, *Institution et public des moyens d'information*, Paris 1973, pp. 190–191. Cf. also K. Mannheim, "Społeczne przyczyny współczesnego kryzysu kultury" (The Social Causes of the Current Crisis in Culture), [in:] *Człowiek i społeczeństwo w dobie przebudowy (Man and Society in a Time of Reconstruction)*, Warszawa 1974.

¹⁵ A. Etzioni, *The Active Society*, New York 1968, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

vities of various groups. In general these take the form of institutions linked to a stratified system. Nevertheless, they also possess their own internal structures. These acquire such a high degree of institutional isolation that there may be problems concerning their identity, erosion and subjection to threat. The literary public is engaged to a large measure in supporting links in whose defence it accepts a rational organization of community and assembly.

Of course, this does not mean that short-lived institutions play a minor role in literary culture. Quite the reverse: The vast majority of the organizational forms assumed by the signifying community has just such a character. The bases for integration are usually professional and local connections, environmental involvements, traditions, rituals and actual contracts. Admittedly, a public organized in this manner exists on a level of intermediate distinction from other social groups, is limited in range, and has imprecise goals, but it also possesses considerable structural elasticity, and is thus able to survive crises by developing various forms of action.

We accept Weber's assumption¹⁷ that the active collectivity has at its disposal a rich repertoire of corporate structures, which regulate the influx of members by means of various systems of requirements, prescriptions and initiatory rites. Among the integrating elements are both axio-affective components that are difficult to define and an additional multiplicity of social, economic and political pressures.

The processes of the institutionalization of the literary public were intensified during the initial period of the modern formation, i. e., according to our conception, at the turn of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. This is connected with the variety of forms of social life developed by salons, periodicals, reading-rooms, libraries, coffee houses and scientific societies. This set-up ensured regular contact and mitigated the effects of ecological dispersal and an imperfect system of informational exchange. In almost every case in which an organized communicative group existed, one discovers institutional consolidation to have been a real contributory factor. Often the succession of phases in the formation of an active

¹⁷ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York 1947.

public corresponded to modifications in this factor. Occasionally the community acquired thereby a larger, better organized field in which to pursue its fruitful activity. On other occasions, it lost its material integrative centre and thereafter had to rest content with an intimacy based on signs alone.

Our documentation shows that the emergence of a distinct institution seldom occurs all at once. It is generally preceded by a period of covert existence which rarely contains all the elements of its future activity. In a favourable situation, a stabilization, an assumption of rational structure, comes about.

We know of various means whereby a freshly emergent group can be integrated into the global order. Often it is enough merely to produce formal or informal, ritualized or private, evidence of social presence. Some signifying communities however have developed a complicated system of material and symbolic forms of integration. The conclusion of such actions is the acceptance of a bill or statute, the elaboration of an organizational schema, complete with a division of roles and an hierarchy of specializations and ends. Contrary to appearances, the active public does not defend itself against such a change in the institution. In our culture, "to belong to..." tends to be the object of strategy, striving, and even favouritism. It is difficult to define unambiguously what benefit individuals and groups derive from such forms of collective participation in literary communication. We now know that it is not just a simple matter of receptive activity. An outside view discovers only the variety of human motivations: circles, clubs, committees, unions, etc., all serve different ends. Their activities do not always coincide with the ideas preserved in the words and symbols of official declarations. The matter is clear-cut, however, whenever the collectivity treats the organizational structure as an instrument. This is the case in intellectual groupings. A political circle is a set of means and forces that favour working upon oneself, social education, and the crystallization of a world-view. But it is a different matter when the group holds the institution itself to be the ultimate end. Here activity becomes reminiscent of a game, and entertainments of this type are sometimes ambiguous ones. Usually, however, this is only the excess of collective energy finding a joyous outlet—at the cost of literature. Then fellow lovers of literature give literary banquets,

organize jubilees and campaigns, fund prizes, raise monuments, write letters, or—at “Meet the author” soirées—cram poets with rancid dairy products and fruits in a state of advanced fermentation.

Generally speaking, one can say that the source of an individual’s aspirations to participate in some such signifying collectivity lies in a motivational system that comprises three basic factors of attraction: 1) a common aim, 2) collective activity, 3) belonging to a group.¹⁸ This view enables one to understand the fact that the very nature of the contact that occurs between the members of an active public can of itself provide a sufficient cause of association. It provides a large number of satisfactions flowing from the level of the achieved community—satisfactions which need have no connection with their primary roles as readers. It is also worth considering the fact that the overall notion of integration embraces four separate types of integration: 1) cultural integration, which includes the sphere of cultural patterning; 2) normative integration, arising from a basis of conformism, of harmony between norm and behaviour; 3) communicative integration, depending upon the exchange of signs; and 4) functional integration, generated by the exchange of services.¹⁹

Thus the active public creates a characteristic framework of social interaction. It functions continuously, independently of any strains between the individual elements of its activity. We have become accustomed to isolate the roles of sender and receiver and to treat them as if they made possible the execution of various once-and-for-all actions prescribed by a particular role: the sender transmits the text—the receiver receives it. This conception takes idealization to the brink of falsity. For we are dealing here with a series of actions or—as the theory of organizations would have it—with “a continuous process of interaction between a multitude of roles and the persons who occupy them and are linked by an informa-

¹⁸ W. Jacher, “Współczesne koncepcje integracji społecznych w socjologii” (Contemporary Conceptions of Social Integration in Sociology), *Studia Socjologiczne*, 1971, no. 3, p. 86.

¹⁹ W. S. Landecker, “Types of Integration and Measurement,” [in:] *The Language of Social Research. A Reader in the Methodology of Social Research*, ed. by P. F. Lazarsfeld and M. Rosenberg, New York 1965, pp. 20–27.

tional network.”²⁰ The social role of the writer involves the execution of a wide variety of activities, few of them directly connected with the creation and transmission of the literary text. The same applies to the member of the literary public: he participates in various interactions, in which reaction to symbols is connected with a large number of forms of institutional representation. These forms ensure the necessary degree of internal order and make possible the relay of organizational experience. The successively emergent signifying communities do not begin in a vacuum.²¹ They exploit the established social patterns for communicative roles. These patterns form a more or less coherent system and alter far more slowly than the sets of activities that serve to realize this system.

Within European culture there prevails a model of hierarchical connections, one in which cooperative relations are subjugated to relations of submission. The consequences of this can be seen in the meta-language and self-definitions of literary behaviour. In general, the patterns of charismatic rule are employed, patterns within which belief in the leader determines the positions of all the participants in the collectivity. Communicative practices, however, bring into existence a completely different arrangement of social roles. The public constitutes a global organization that provides the basic conditions for the production and consumption of texts. Thus it creates its own “productive core,” calling forth the roles of distributor, supplier and receiver.²² In T. Kotarbiński’s formulation,²³ all the “carriers” of these roles contribute to “the success of the whole.” Thus a pragmatic model of the literary community cannot have an hierarchical structure, even though the participants in such a group are usually possessed of an hierarchical consciousness. So in order to illustrate the state of affairs in question, rather than using the

²⁰ A. K. Kościński “Procesy informacyjno-decyzyjne” (Informational-decisional Processes). [in:] *Organizacje. Socjologia struktur, procesów, ról* (*Organizations. The Sociology of Structures, Processes, Roles*), ed. by W. Adamski, Warszawa 1976, p. 105.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

²² J. G. March, H. A. Simon, *Teoria organizacji* (*The Theory of Organizations*), Warszawa 1964, p. 89.

²³ T. Kotarbiński, *Traktat o dobrej robocie* (*A Tract Concerning Good Work*), Warszawa 1958, p. 75.

figure of a pyramid, we employ a series of intersecting circles. The result of our analysis so far is that the structure of the active public is a dynamic one, and contains within itself conflicts and contradictions. Creative artists aim to achieve an organization of the creative type. This term is derived from Mannheim and refers to a form of organization that favours innovation. This ideal is more of a socio-technical one and comprises the following elements: liberalism, multilevel activity, a prevalence of professional loyalty over organizational pressures, a restriction of external hierarchical control, a dispersal of power, the dominance of links between colleagues, indeterminacy of organizational structure, and a loose structure open to constant restructuration and change. The reading public prefers an organization of the organic type, within which a common system of interests, values and needs compensates for the lack of specialization. Most often however this culminates in a mechanical form of integration, under the sway of specialization, defined positions and tasks, chains of information flow etc.²⁴ Thus the interests in question are contradictory. Even when their programme does not oppose change, the receivers wish to participate in determining the direction it is to take. Each successive choice made without their willing consent limits the field of choice for the next action. Gradual change—change that is attuned to the communicative experience of the entire community—is more usefully effective. The active public is conscious of the various dangers and anomalies manifested by social life. As Goffman says, it doesn't want "to be had": it is careful and attentive. It is vigilant, gathering reading experience and drawing practical conclusions. One of the most important functions becomes that of control. Here everyone controls everything and everyone else: receivers—authors, and authors—receivers. The supervised supervise the supervision themselves. Although we are accustomed to observing the functioning of coherent, concentrated instances of control, this control-mechanism appears in a dispersed form. In actuality one has to speak of the entire field of literary control, within which are organized particular specialized centres. Without doubt one of these is literary criticism.

²⁴ A. Z. Kamiński. "Typy struktur biurokratycznych a racjonalność organizacyjna" (Types of Bureaucratic Structure and Organizational Rationality), [in:] *Organizacje*, pp. 156–158.

One may assume with Goffman that the public brings forth a team, the activity of which is completely different from that of particular individuals. The existence of a team is most evident when it "turns to" another team. The contact and interplay between these two instances represent an important component of public life. Within this team hierarchical relations prevail, room is provided for the roles of leader and *vedette*. Its activities rely on a series of interactions that are adjusted according to the social and communicative situation.²⁵ In Etzioni's view these functions are fulfilled by various elites which control a chosen area of social activity, collect and order information, compare programmes, strengthen or weaken directive signals etc. In our case it is not just a question of achieving the optimal (desired) relationship between literary production and consumption. Rather, these activities are carried out in the interest of the entire literary system. They aim to maintain its life, to preserve its continuity and efficiency of communication. Control is transferred to the interior of the organization and assumes the character of self-control. The public has at its disposal a rich repertoire of means to regulate, punish, reward, exert pressure, and to repress. As we know, it deploys them eagerly and often. The essential role, however, belongs to the somewhat underhand mechanism that extorts from activities a conformism *vis à vis* accepted values and norms. It goes by the name of "potentialization" and is based on the replacement of control by the possibility of applying it.²⁶

The practices that regiment literary freedom are accompanied by another paradoxical phenomenon. We believe the fundamental problem of literary culture to be the matter of borders. The public knows the regulations concerning their violation, and it also knows how to behave so as to preserve them intact. It develops special rules for avoiding hazards, circumnavigating prohibitions, and modifying distances. The selfcontained reality of literary ritual serves this purpose: the reality of those "formal and conventional acts

²⁵ E. Goffman, *La Mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, vol. 1, Paris 1973, pp. 93–103.

²⁶ B. K. Kuc, "Kontrola organizacyjna" (Organizational Control), [in:] *Organizacje*, p. 259.

through which individuals manifest their submissiveness and respect towards the object of absolute values which represents them.”²⁷ The repertoire of rituals is immense. The circumstances of their origin have not been explained satisfactorily for all cases.²⁸ All the same, we know that they fulfil the essential function of defending the system against the threat of change. The mechanisms of its self-regulation are guided by the stabilizing potential of ritual. At crucial moments there occurs a change in the rules, a revolt against an imposed and internalized conformism. It would however be wrong to ascribe a fundamental role in the functioning of literary culture to the process by which communicative rituals are born and rejected. For it is the results of this process that are of decisive significance. There arise large areas of semiotic uncertainty. This fact constitutes the actual mechanism of self-regulation: the active public governs by means of that “uncertainty”²⁹ maintaining the literary system relatively balanced and favourable to itself.

One should put aside subtle disquisitions on the poetics of reception. For as a rule their sole fruits are idyllic visions. In the intra-textual sphere there is no room for macro-social conflicts. The scenarios of behaviour contained in virtual constructions await realization. Until that actually takes place, the work in fact remains neutral. But the author who participates in the public finds himself in a different situation. He ceaselessly chooses and is chosen. That sociologist was right who stated that the fundamental unit of public life is the relationship: “alone—with.”³⁰

The essence of literary exchange can be represented in the form of vectors facing in different directions. In the mathematical exercises with which I was once tormented, two trains departed from distant stations and approached one another at varying speeds. Attempts were made to convince me that one could calculate the point at which they would meet—but I refused to accept this idea. I had no faith in the engine-drivers. The staff that directs literary communications

²⁷ Goffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–180, 215–225.

²⁸ Cf. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, London 1969.

²⁹ J. Staniszkis, “Struktura jako rezultat procesów adaptacyjnych w organizacji” (Structure as the Result of Adaptational Processes within an Organization), [in:] *Organizacje*, p. 174.

³⁰ Goffman, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 33.

is without doubt more efficient than the staff of the railway, but even here the unexpected can occur. Writers arrive too early, and the public arrives criminally late. Or vice versa. In this case, the phenomenon of public activity can be described by creating a formula for simultaneous consideration of the activities of all the participants in a community. This is something of which the sociology of the theatre is well aware: it examines the comedies played out both onstage and in the auditorium. The same task faces us.³¹

Let us return to Horace. Ever since the period of the Romantics we have been slaves to the fascination of a somewhat strange vision of literary communication. A "warm" (better still—a fevered) public surrounds its poet, hangs upon his every word, receives the word like a communion, founds a cult upon it, and preserves and re-activates it in sudden bouts of furious reading. A mystery of dispensation is celebrated, there reigns a state of perpetual semiotic hunger and boundless gratitude is felt towards the beneficent creator. The public attends to the seer on bended knees, falling headlong before him in moments of ecstasy and shedding tears of emotion. Horace himself knew of such situations, but he also knew that they are not the whole truth concerning the ties of literary communication. He draws a different picture. Here is a public that flees from the "lunatic poet," who

is mad, and, like a bear, if he has had strength to break the confining bars of his cage, he puts learned and unlearned alike to flight by the scourge of his recitals. If he catches a man, he holds him fast and reads him to death—a leech that will not let go the skin, till gorged with blood.³²

The vision is a suggestive and instructive one. The poet hurtles along "with head upraised" and "splutters verses." "Men of sense" flee from him. Only raw and "rash" boys remain within his sphere of action. Gazing at the heights of fame, the luckless seer finally stumbles into a ditch or a well. His cries for help are pointless: no one intends to help him. Then Horace reveals the essential, fundamental ambiguity of the task of the word-smith: above all, it is not "very clear how he comes to be a verse-monger" (the

³¹ Descotes, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³² Horace, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

theoretician even advances the embarrassing insinuation “has he defiled ancestral ashes?”). His other intentions are equally difficult to fathom. Perhaps “he threw himself in on purpose and does not wish to be saved?” In the interests of stoic humanitarianism and balance in communication Horace instructs one to leave the poet in the ditch. “Who saves a man against his will does the same as murder him,” he writes, in the spirit of the age. He also formulates a universal message: “let poets have the right and power to destroy themselves.”³³ The public jealously guards this right: it permits the poet to die. In the physical sense: of hunger; in the communicative sense: of indifference and discouragement. This aspect of the functioning of the active public is of particularly momentous cultural significance. It is a sign of society’s coldness and cruelty, but it also contains a dose of collective optimism and magnanimity: it bears a hope that at least some authors will find the misdeeds of their pens forgotten—and thus forgiven.

Transl. by *Paul Coates*

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 489.