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The Tsar is Naked

«...but no one has the courage to say
 that the Tsar is naked».

L. Tolstoy. «On Shakespeare and on drama»,
 1900.

Tolstoy discovered Shakespeare like Columbus discovered America: incidentally, without knowing that himself. He was looking for the pathway into the India of the religious drama, but arrived at the unknown America of the absurd Shakespeare.

His aim was to expose the “lies of extolling inartistic, immoral writer”, to argue about the assessment of Shakespeare. In this sense he claimed his opinion to be “in direct opposition to that established in all the whole European world”. But in order to do so, he had to reconsider Shakespeare from anew, and not only his fame. The way of his reasoning and the course of the argument went through the disclosure of Shakespeare. As it turned out, Tolstoy, on the one hand, and the rest of the European world, on the other hand, not merely differently assess one and the same thing (in this case the tone of the article would be mainly preaching and moral), but talk about totally different things. Thus, Shakespeare in the language of Tolstoy and Shakespeare in the language of European world have nothing common, but the name. And the dynamite of his article explodes the literary tradition much more notably, than it shakes the moral foundations of European world.

I pronounce Tolstoy’s article a discovery because genuine, real Shakespeare has never been exposed so much, in all truth and essence, as on the pages of his article. And also because before Tolstoy Shakespeare was as known as America before Columbus. It does not matter that up to now virtually nobody admits Tolstoy’s discovery or that the lands that he discovered will be named with someone else’s name. He anticipated that the majority “will not admit even the sheer possibility of his justice (of the judgment of Shakespeare) and will not pay any attention”. Thus it happened—because Tolstoy’s offensive landed on an empty space. If that Shakespeare were at stake, the one that Tolstoy is continuously talking about, the absurd Shakespeare, then it seems everybody would easily agree that “Shakespeare can not be recognized either as a great genius, or even as an average author.” It is common to believe that Tolstoy did not understand Shakespeare (and pity him for that), therefore, Tolstoy’s challenge could not have been accepted: the argument about reassessment was inconceivable.

Tolstoy’s conclusions are about a different writer, the poorly understood, the distorted Shakespeare, therefore they even do not intersect with—being in a different plane towards—common opinion: they are dealing with merely different subjects. His arguments, then, seemed so absurd, naively wild, that they did not deserve, it seems, even a single argumentative rejoinder. By all this I mean to say only that the emphasis of Tolstoy’s article is—quite contrary to his deliberate intention—not on moral conclusions (assessment), but on the literary arguments (the essence of Shakespeare’s poetry). I see support to this conclusion in the answer that Tolstoy refers to: in disagreements, in disputes, he says, “I was not refuted when I pointed out Shakespeare’s defects; they only condoled with me for my want of comprehension.” And—surprisingly enough—the opponents “without paying any

attention to my criticisms as to why the selected ten lines did not satisfy the most elementary demands of esthetic and common sense, they were enchanted with the very thing which to me appeared absurd, incomprehensible, and inartistic.” (Emphasis added).

This tells me most convincingly that the nature of the disagreement—I am stating this again—is in the unbiased literary perception of Shakespeare, but not in the ethical or esthetical assessment. That is why “imprecisely misty” articles and talks of Shakespeare’s admirers kept always avoiding and bypassing Tolstoy’s judgments.

And this is why Tolstoy believed that everything that exists in our mind under the name of Shakespeare is an epidemic suggestion, hypnosis, literary apparition, the outcome of the activity of the deprived of esthetic feelings and pedantic “learned German critics”, who, in Chekhov’s phrasing, value not Shakespeare, but the commentaries to him. Without any exaggeration: everything that we call Shakespeare—on the stage, in literary criticism, in the reader’s mind—is not Shakespeare, but comments to him; from the beginning to the end the cooked up, imaginary, fictive, substitute for the genuine one, fantastic copy of Shakespeare. Shakespeare is an age-old garbage collector of philosophical and various other fabrications, the sharpening stone for interpreters’ sense of humour and wit.

There is nothing more horrible than literary tradition: it a first-degree funeral of the artist and the Mausoleum on his tomb, it is the tomb-stone bearing his name. If Russian tradition from Belinskii to Vengerov—so recent and young—to the incomprehensibility distorted the images of numerous writers, substituted them with fictions, twins, banknotes that were widely released into currency, then how a three hundred years old and encompassing all world tradition must have crushed Shakespeare.

11.000 volumes of highbrow tractates (what an horror we can sense, when Tolstoy pronounces this) buried Shakespeare below them, faked, created a new Shakespeare, this “greatest moralist of all times”, the teacher of the humankind, etc., etc., in other words, an eternal fellow-traveller: the mirror, into which numerous Brandeses¹ would look and recognize themselves (ah, how similar-looking) and their treasured ideas.

Tolstoy disrobes Shakespeare from the splendid garments that the critics wrapped him into.

One by one, he strips Shakespeare from “inexistent assets”, nonexistent beauties, and exposes Shakespeare. This is a usual technique of the thought and creative work of Tolstoy: taking a common idea in wide currency and turning it on its head, turning it inside out. Disclosure is the most frequent course of his argument. He appears to relieve phenomena from the veil of common beliefs, and thus exposes them. He has this primeval look at the things: he sees them as if just created, for the first time; age-old biases wither and fall down when Tolstoy approaches the matters. In the same way he looked at Shakespeare: as if he has just been created, as if the centuries of literary tradition never existed; he has a strong, “that simple, direct artistic sensibility which, for people with a feeling for art, clearly distinguishes esthetic impressions from all others.” He cleansed Shakespeare of 11.000 volumes of highbrow tractates and explanatory commentaries and somehow amazingly closely approached him. And here he stood in front of him: the primeval, new Shakespeare—the unknown and amazing. The tsar is naked—this is the whole gist of Tolstoy’s article: he was the first to see that the tsar is naked, that the garments that everybody took for the tsar’s attire, fall down at the first close look, that they do not exist at all, that they were created in the imagination of the loyal subjects and the

¹ Translator’s comment: Georg Brandes (1842 – 1927), a Danish critic and literary scholar.

king's men, and that it is useful sometimes to view the ordinary things through the eyes of Andersen's fool².

It is natural that such impoverished, the disrobed, and robbed Shakespeare—deprived of all “beauties and dignity”, and of all meaning that was ascribed to him—could only have been taken for the evidence of Tolstoy's own poverty, his misunderstanding.

The kind of poetics—not only the one formulated by the scholars, but also the unconsciously existing in the minds, the prime element that calls to being the arts—the poetics that postulated allegory as the essence of the art was looking not for what in fact is pronounced in the creation of art, but what it could claim on the occasion of the piece of art, it lived in the death of the creation: the less life there remained in the art, the more this poetics could ingrain into it and interpret through it. For this poetics it was important to lose, wash away, blur the particularity, the concreteness, the exceptionality of the creation (the style). Everything in the art it treated as a fable, the meaning of which is in its endless application, “attachment” to various events in order to explain them. It is natural that Tolstoy, who read from Shakespeare that and only that was in fact said there, appeared as the one who did not understand the reading, since for this kind of poetics understanding literally means misunderstanding; in turn, really understanding means for them not just understanding, but interpreting, bringing in something of your own, composing.

But we—those who have different perspective on the art—know that art does not descend to a fable, but fable ascends to the art; we regard a fable as everything else in the art (since we come across it in the work of a poet, but not a philosopher or an orator): as the combination of artistic techniques, as the phenomenon of style. We know that art hardly tolerates being asked about and written about. I said what I said—this is the universal formula of the true art. It opposes the other one: he said not what he said, but something else. According to the first one, art is the great tautology, autonomous identity to its techniques, self-realization of the style is always equal to itself, like music; according to the second one, art is an allegory in the broadest meaning of the word, and always tell us about something else which it is not.

This is why we value and pose it as promising Tolstoy's attempt to have a look at Shakespeare as at ... Shakespeare. We have had enough of the “excitement of the fool”. We know that Tolstoy superbly understood Shakespeare because he could see him such as he is. Tolstoy did not impoverish Shakespeare, but sensed and exposed him in all monstrous, overwhelming force of his style, instead of the adapted for the purposes of inquiry and reciting quasi-tragic “Shakespeare narrated to the children.”

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² Translator's comment: Hans Christian Andersen (1805 – 1875), a Danish author and poet; the author of short-story "The Emperor's New Clothes" where the phrase "The King is naked" comes from. Vygotsky seems to confuse the characters, though: in the original Andersen's story, it was the child who pronounced the phrase while Vygotsky seems to attribute it to "a fool".